

Weeks Act, 1911

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The Weeks Act of March 1, 1911, resulted from a decade of debate in and out of Congress that addressed basic constitutional and conservation issues. Named for Congressman John W. Weeks of Massachusetts, the act authorized federal purchase of forestlands in the headwaters of navigable streams, established the National Forest Reservation Commission, gave consent for states to enter into compacts for the purpose of conserving forests and water supplies, and authorized federal matching funds for approved state agencies to protect forested watersheds of navigable streams.

The Constitution does not contain explicit authority for federal purchase of forestlands. In fact, the whole of federal land policy until 1891 had been to sell or grant the vast public domain as quickly as the administrative machinery would allow. The Forest Reserve Act of 1891 authorized retention of certain forested public lands; only two decades later, in 1911, Congress authorized additions to the public land base through purchase. Even though disposal continued apace, this major shift in policy paralleled the growth of the conservation movement. By 1980, over 22 million acres of land had been added, through purchase, to the national forest system in the eastern United States.

Most of the debate centered on the purchase clause of the act; of equal importance but of little controversy was the authorization of matching funds. At a time when states were only beginning to develop forestry agencies with traditional timidity or skepticism on the part of legislatures, this federal incentive of up to \$10,000 per year for each state provided an important impetus to the conservation movement. Some writers have linked the passage of the Weeks Act to the devastating forest fires in Idaho ("The Big Blowup"), which occurred a year earlier and attracted national headlines, but there is little evidence to support this view. In fact, the section of the act that was instrumental in bolstering state-level forestry received little attention at the time; opponents and proponents focused on the land purchase section instead.

The National Forest Reservation Commission was comprised of the secretaries of war (now defense), agriculture, interior, and two members each from the House of Representatives and the Senate. (The commission was abolished by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, and its functions were transferred to the secretary of agriculture.) The commission appraised and selected land for purchase on the basis of protecting watersheds of navigable streams. All purchased lands became a permanent part of the national forest system.

The Clarke-McNary Act of 1924 eliminated the purchase restriction to watersheds of navigable streams and increased the matching funds for state forestry agencies. The Woodruff-McNary Act of 1928 greatly increased authorization for purchase.

Further Reading: Williams Shands and Robert Healy, *The Lands Nobody Wanted* (1977).
Harold K. Steen, *The U.S. Forest Service: A History* (1976).