

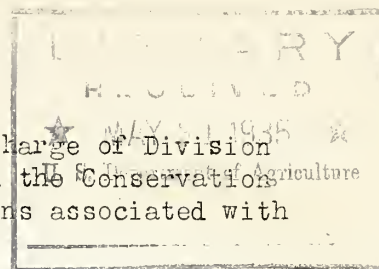
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WHO SHALL OWN OUR FOREST LANDS?

A radio talk by L. F. Kneipp, Assistant Forester in Charge of Division of Lands, Forest Service, broadcast Friday, May 10, 1935, in the Conservation Day program, National Farm and Home Hour, by 61 radio stations associated with the National Broadcasting Company.



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Almost one-third the area of the continental United States is forest land. In the two centuries or more during which our policy was one of disposal, three-fourths of it -- including four-fifths of all the most valuable, or commercial forest land -- passed to private hands. There was no question, then, as to who should own forest lands.

During that period our Western frontier disappeared. And we can, to quote Secretary Wallace,

"never again, in this country, unite on a great drive into the new lands, the rich mines, and the virgin forests of the West. It was a thrilling, satisfying drive while it lasted, but it has ended, and we are only now beginning to pick up the pieces."

As the report of the National Resources Board brings out, we began to save pieces of our forest lands during President Cleveland's administration. For beginning then, and continuing down through Theodore Roosevelt's time, we found it necessary -- in an effort to help prolong the nation's rapidly dwindling timber/supplies -- to keep some forest lands in federal ownership. So we withdrew portions of the public domain from entry and put them under administration as National Forests.

But this public domain was in the West. And there were, in the East, the Lake States and the South, millions of acres of forest lands which had been so heavily cut by private owners, then burned and reburned, that floods were aggravated, property was damaged, and human lives were lost. When it became evident that private owners were not reclaiming this land, a popular demand arose that the Government acquire it -- through purchase -- and restore it to productivity.

So, authorized by the Weeks and the Clarke-McNary laws and their amendments acquisition by purchase began; the federally owned National Forest system was brought nearer to older established centers of population; the policy of safeguarding the remaining forests of the public domain was broadened to include the essential job of reclaiming cut-over lands which private initiative could not, or would not, restore to productivity.

During all this time the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service had pointed to the need for changes in lumber industry methods of dealing with forest properties. Gradually, public opinion, together with that of more progressive leaders of the industry, realized that forests were not deposits of ore but are, rather, products of the soil susceptible, like other crops, of renewal and management, and that, so managed, they can contribute with security and stability to the support of their fair share of our nation's population. But as long as stands of virgin timber remained -- as long as profits came rolling in -- the industry's rank and file paid little attention to sustained yield forest management.

Then came 1929 and the necessity to prevent nation-wide chaos. And since forests and forest industries had previously furnished full time work for 1,300,000 people as well as supplemental cash incomes for 2,500,000 farmers, it was evident that something more must be done to prevent early exhaustion of those forests upon which families and communities depended for their very existence. Exploitation must stop; sustained yield management must take its place.

In such an undertaking, long-time planning and stability of ownership are necessary. Unfortunately, private forest land ownership is not stable. For example: estimates now place at 75 million acres the area of cut-over forest lands in long-time tax delinquency. Nearly as large as Iowa and Kansas combined, this "no man's land" brings in no revenue. And much land which still bears virgin forests is so burdened with taxes and long-time interest and carrying charges that its owners are forced to liquidate through quick exploitation or forced sales.

This situation has now reached the stage where it threatens the stability of farming, of manufacture, of local government. A re-adjustment in forest-land ownership is, therefore, necessary. This does not mean that private ownership need be wiped out. But it does mean that it is essential to the economic and social welfare of the United States that the present ownership ratio be changed.

Recognizing this fact, there has been recommended an acquisition program that would place an additional 178 million acres of forest lands in Federal, State and local public ownership. Under this program only about one-half of the commercial forest lands -- instead of four-fifths, as at present -- would remain in private ownership. And the program includes the purchase, not only of cut-over land but of land bearing merchantable timber as well. For one purpose is to establish sustained yield units which will help, now, to prevent creation of more ghost towns as well as to help, now, to build up some of those which have been created in the past.

To both policy and program, the lumber industry has agreed. This is fortunate and fitting, for in forests and forest lands industry and public have -- in the last analysis -- mutual interests, opportunities and responsibilities.

What are those opportunities and responsibilities? How may they be met so that our forest empire may contribute, with security and stability, to the permanent support of its fair share of the country's population? Answers to these, and other questions, will be discussed in the next of this series of informal talks on that part of the National Resources Board report which has to do with Forestry in Land Use Planning.

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