

Changes in the National Forests—Over 100 Years of Progress

In: Ecosystem Management and the Future Era, 1993-Present

There have been thousands of changes to the national forests over the last 100-plus years. The most significant change has been the establishment of the USDA Forest Service to administer our national forest heritage. The purpose of the Federal Government changed from that of giving or selling the public domain to reserving and managing the public forest lands for the people of the United States and for future generations. Following are some of the important changes that have occurred on the 191 million acres of national forests and grasslands.

National Forests and National Grasslands

Prior to 1891, there were no national forests—or forest reserves as they were first called—and no national grasslands. Today, there are 187,419,277 acres of national forests, 3,841,781 acres of national grasslands, and 524,502 acres of land utilization projects, research and experimental areas, and related lands—a total of 191,785,560 acres of land administered by the USDA Forest Service for the people of the United States.

National Forest Receipts

Prior to 1891, the forested public domain land, some of which became the national forests, was not on the State and county tax rolls and thus contributed nothing to local, State, and Federal funding. Currently, the Forest Service collects \$967.8 million in receipts. In addition, the national forests contribute to the States and counties more than \$260.8 million as part of the receipts collected from timber sales, grazing, recreation, mineral extraction, and special use authorizations for firewood, plants, Christmas trees, cabins, resorts, and outfitters and guides. These funds, used for schools and roads, generally represent 25 percent of the receipts collected during the year, the other 75 percent are deposited to the U.S. Treasury.

Fire

Before 1891, an estimated 30 million acres of forest area were burned each year. Currently, the amount of fire damage is approximately 1.9 million acres per year on all ownerships.

Grazing

Before 1891, many millions of sheep and cattle grazed the public domain forest lands. Today, the Forest Service administers approximately 50 million acres of rangeland in 33 States. Currently, 8,783 grazing allotments (around 9.3 million head months) contribute \$7.0 million to the Forest Service receipts annually.

Timber

Before 1891, very little timber was harvested from the lands destined to become national forests. Most of the timber that was harvested was used by homesteaders, miners, and railroads. By 1998, the national forests produced about 3.3 billion board feet of timber generating \$446 million in gross revenues.

Reforestation

Prior to 1891, there was no reforestation on cut-over or burned-over areas. One hundred years later, the Forest Service is planting trees on 287,900 acres annually. There will always be forests for future generations.

Fishing

Before 1891, there was minimal fishing on waters in what would become the national forests. Currently, fishing contributes 18.9 million visitor days annually on 2.3 million acres of lakes, ponds, and reservoirs and 128,000 miles of fishable rivers and streams, and 16,500 miles of coasts and shorelines, and the Forest Service administers millions of acres of streamside (riparian) habitats.

Hunting

Prior to 1891, hunting was minimal on what would become the national forests, with much coming from hardy outdoor recreationists on extended trips or on areas near homesteads and cities. Today, hunting on the national forests contributes around 19.4 million visitor days annually and the Forest Service administers millions of acres of wildlife habitat while the States control the numbers of huntable animals.

Minerals

Prior to 1891, the value and dollar amount of minerals removed from public domain timberlands was not known—but in some cases, it was substantial. Presently, there are about 7,000 active mining claims on National Forest System lands and another 1,000 or so pits and quarries that provide common variety minerals such as sand, gravel, stone, and pumice. In 1998, about 18.5 million barrels of oil, 150 billion cubic feet of natural gas, and 75 million short tons of coal were produced on National Forest lands.

Recreation and Tourism

Before 1891, recreation was quite limited on what would become the national forests, with much recreation use being for weeks or months at a time in the mountain peak country, popular hot springs, and easily accessible camping and fishing places. Today, recreation use on the national forests is enormous, with more than 860 million visits (or about 341 million recreation visitor days) returning about \$47.6 million to the Treasury each year. There are 140 ski areas, 485 resorts, over 4,000 campgrounds, 73 major visitor centers, and 4,100 private businesses, which provide more than 139,000 jobs on and adjacent to the national forests.

Soil and Water Resource Improvements

Before the national forests existed, destruction or massive changes to waterways caused by uncontrolled mining, grazing, and timbering developments were rampant on the public domain. In 1998, restoration for fish habitat was accomplished on about 1,600 miles of streams and 9,500 acres of lakes, with another 38,500 acres of land improvements.

Trails

Prior to 1891, there were few trails in or through the mountains, and most of those were older American Indian trails, hunter or game trails, or stock driveways. Currently, there are more than 133,000 miles of national forest trails, fewer than several decades back but considerably more than 100 years ago.

Roads

Before 1891, there were only a few roads—mostly private, toll wagon roads—on what would become the national forests. A little over 100 years later, there are 383,000 miles of road, ranging from dirt roads to interstate highways and 7,700 miles of National Scenic Byways in 30 states. In 1998, the Forest Service decommissioned almost 2,100 miles of unneeded roads.

Wilderness

Prior to 1891, the national forest areas in the West were practically all untracked wilderness areas; in the East, what would become national forests were mostly lands that had been cut, burned, or farmed. By 1998, there were 412 congressionally designated wilderness units administered by the Forest Service in the National Wilderness Preservation System. This amounts to 34.7 million acres of wilderness (about 1 acre in 6 of the National Forest System). The Forest Service manages 75 percent of the designated wilderness within the lower 48 states, or about 63 percent of all wildernesses in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Wild and Scenic Rivers

In 1891, the rivers on what would become national forests were almost entirely wild, with a few rivers or creeks diverted for irrigation and mining operations. Over a century later, Congress has recognized more than 4,348 miles of 96 rivers on the national forests as part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

Wildlife Habitat Restoration

Before the National Forest System was established, wildlife habitat was often changed or destroyed by the many activities-some illegal-on the public domain forest lands. In 1998, the Forest Service restored over 167,000 acres of terrestrial habitat, including nearly 42,000 acres within rangeland ecosystems.

Forest Research

Prior to 1891, there were basically no organized research studies on forests. Today, the Forest Service supports approximately 3,005 research studies concerned with the national forest resources.

Forest Service Employees

Before 1891, a handful of Government employees in the Department of Agriculture were paid to study the forestry situation in America. In 1998, the Forest Service employed about 28,000 permanent full-time positions (about 39 percent women, 16 percent minorities) and another 12,000 temporary positions, which range from archeologists to wilderness guards.

Special Employment Programs

Prior to 1931, there were no special employment programs on the national forest lands. Today, the Forest Service has 18 Job Corps centers, with 9,373 students between the ages of 16 and 22 employed on conservation projects and education programs. Job Corps students accomplished almost \$21.5 million worth of work on national forest projects. YCC employed another 624 enrollees on the national forests during the summer months, returning \$1.42 in work for each dollar appropriated. The Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) has about 5,484 low-income persons, 55 or older, participating in national forest and other Forest Service projects, returning \$1.58 in work value for each appropriated dollar.

Volunteers in the National Forests

Before 1891, there were no "official" volunteers on the lands that became national forests. However, over 100 years later, 98,271 volunteers contributed work valued at \$34.9 million. Volunteers often serve as hosts to oversee the daily operations of the many Forest Service recreational facilities.

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