NATIONAL FORESTS IN MISSOURI

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The protection, administration, and management of forest lands in federal ownership in the state of Missouri is the responsibility of the United States Forest Service. Two administrative units have been established. The Clark National Forest comprising 851,920 acres has its headquarters at Rolla, and the Mark Twain National Forest with 419,492 acres has its headquarters at Springfield. Each unit is in charge of a forest supervisor, who is assisted by a full complement of assistants trained in the various phases of the diversified demands that add up to the overall land management problems arising in these forest areas, located in the Ozark section of the state.

The Act of March 3, 1891 authorizes the President of the United States to withdraw and designate suitable areas in the states in which unappropriated public lands are located for national forests purposes. No lands suitable for forest purposes had remained in public ownership in Missouri by the time interest of the general public had been crystallized into action on the need for the protection and wise use of the local timber resources in Missouri.

A similar situation had arisen previously in many other eastern states and to meet these needs the act of March 1, 1911 authorized the purchase by the federal government of forest lands. Such purchases are however not made until the necessary statutory provision is made by the respective states, whereby the federal government may acquire through purchase suitable wild forest lands.

In Missouri the first steps to authorize such purchases were not taken until 1933. Even then there was much delay and hesitancy. The initial statutory authorization limited the federal government in the amount of land purchases per county to such small areas as to make economic administration out of the question. It required considerable action by the proponents of an adequate and practicable purchase program to bring about the removal of such limitations and finally in 1935 the state of Missouri enacted the necessary laws for a broad purchase program for wild forest lands for national forest administration by the United States Forest Service.

In Missouri the purchase program is carried on in 28 counties in the timbered section of the Ozarks, and the progress is contingent on the availability of federal funds. During the recent war period there were no funds available nor purchases made. There has now been a resumption of purchases on a very limited scale.

In 1905 the Secretary of Agriculture laid down some broad fundamentals for the guidance of the United States Forest Service in its administration of national forest areas. He stated that all conflicting questions must be solved from the standpoint of "the greatest good of the greatest number in the long run." Accordingly, the various problems arising in the use of forage, timber, recreation, agricultural, water and wildlife resources have been settled in line with the Secretary's order. The United States Forest Service has not in its administration of the national forests
in Missouri experienced any insurmountable situations in the multiple use of the land resources. There has been a general improvement in the social and economic welfare of the many residents dependent on the natural resources within the national forest areas.

Protection against fire receives first consideration. Without adequate protection there can be no rehabilitation of the potential timber areas. Destructive fires in the forest areas have in the past been very common. Within the past twelve years, progress has been made in decreasing the number of wild fires. An effective fire protection organization is in operation. Prompt discovery of a fire and experienced fire fighters lessen the extent and damage. In many instances the heavy hand of the federal courts has been felt by inveterate fire setters caught in the act. The deterrent effect on other potential woods burners is far reaching when information of a neighbors run-in with the federal law becomes known.

During the war years there was a heavy drain on the timber resources. On the national forest areas, the demand was met without detriment to the remaining timber. The existing exigency made possible the utilization of low quality forest products ordinarily not saleable or used in normal times because of the higher cost of processing for market. The removal of this class of material has resulted in a general stand improvement of the young and thrifty trees remaining on the cutover areas. Through bettered growing conditions there will be an acceleration in growth and increase in value at a later harvesting.

Most of the wartime timber operations were on small or family group scale. Such small scale timber operations serve readily as a supplement to the farming and mining activities carried on at other times. The numerous small agricultural areas acquired by the federal government in the purchase of larger wild timber land tracts are made available for use locally either as an independent unit or in conjunction with other similar lands remaining in private ownership.

The acquisition of this land by the federal government does not withdraw it from legitimate use. As custodians of these areas, the United States Forest Service regulates its proper use and the development of the valuable natural resources. It provides for use and participation by all citizens as against individuals who do not have the general welfare in mind, but are primarily interested in their own selfish gain.

The extensive natural resources of the Ozarks in the Clark and Mark Twain national forests are protected, administered and maintained for the general benefit of the citizens of Missouri.

So much for the current federal efforts. It might not be amiss to consider further some of the factors that contribute to the critical rural problem in the timbered section of the State. The evidence of the sad state of affairs was apparent to all, but unfortunately there were no determined measures nor effective steps taken by the local communities nor the State to do something about it. This complacency and inaction brought the need of federal assistance and action. A partial answer is found in the establishment of the national forest areas.

In the early years of the present century several federal foresters
indicated the need for careful use of the forest resources as against the then destructive exploitation under way. These admonitions were brushed aside. The timber resources were removed without any thought for the future social and economic needs of the various counties, communities and areas that were being ruined one after another. With the timber gone, most of the local population was left stranded without means of support. Farmers lost their local markets and most of the woods workers were left stranded. Decrease in tax income curtailed essential functions of the various counties. Everybody was broke. Little or no thought was given to wise and systematic cropping so as to produce a continued supply of forest products. Forest protection stabilizes the soil and creates a stable forest community.

By 1920 the major portion of the timbered areas of the Ozarks had been cut over and the large timber operators had moved out. Unprotected timber land made it easy for the stranded residents to remove currently the better trees of the more desirable species before a real value had come through sufficient growth in size. The consistent removal of this type of material opened the way for a timber growth of "weed" or less valuable species to take over.

Supplemental to the federal efforts are the activities of the State Conservation Commission through its forestry division. These federal and state agencies are, by proper land management on larger timber land areas and the smaller woodland areas, forming an integral part of any well organized and operating farm unit.

The final answer is not to be found in the current efforts of the representatives of the federal government. Continuous effective measures to accomplish the social and economic rehabilitation of the forest areas are maintained only by the ever clamant insistence by the citizens of the State that adequate financial support be furnished the agencies to which has been assigned the responsibility of administration. The responsibilities of good citizens everywhere are heavy. Success in proper and adequate land use of public and private areas is the challenge. This challenge is particularly directed to the younger group that has had the opportunity to study and become familiar with the true objectives and needs. With opportunity for this understanding comes the challenge for action by the individual as he reaches the stage of responsibility.