

The U.S. Forest Service

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What is the U.S. Forest Service and what does it do? As easy a question as this may be, the answer is rather difficult and complex and will depend on who you ask. The U.S. Forest Service is many different things to many different people. Part of the reason for its schizophrenic identity is due to the public perception of what the agency is and what it actually does and part of the reason is due to the culture of the agency as a whole. To fully understand the U.S. Forest Service, one must understand the history of the service, the current role of the organization and the challenges faced by the agency today.

History and Creation of the U.S. Forest Service

According to the U.S Forest Service website, the U.S. Forest Service was established in 1905 as an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture to manage public lands and national forests and grasslands. The establishment of the U.S. Forest Service was a radical concept at the time. The idea of the government owning, controlling and regulating land use when the new found resources of the West were being privatized at a time when the government was virtually giving away land to citizens to use however they saw fit marked a dramatic change in the United States.

After decades of exploiting the natural resources of the country for personal and economic gain, Americans began to realize that the natural resources we possessed were not infinitely available. This shift in thought did not

occur over night, but is the cornerstone behind the creation of the U.S. Forest Service and its duties.

Gifford Pinchot, the first Chief of the Forest Service is one of the major contributors not only to the change in thought for American citizens but also for the creation of the Forest Service and the scope of the agencies duties. Understanding the legacy left by Pinchot on the U.S. Forest Service is essential to understanding the role of the agency even today. One needs to only look at the U.S. Forest Service website for a few minutes before you see Pinchot's name and realize the impact his legacy continues to have.

Pinchot came from a wealthy family that made its fortune in the timber industry. Pinchot's parents realized the impact that their business had on the environment as they cut down trees and altered the landscape for profit and raised Gifford to right the wrongs that led to their wealth. From a young age, Gifford was taught to appreciate the wilderness and respect the environment rather than to exploit it. The ideals instilled in him by his parents directed him for the rest of his life and contribute a great deal to ideals that he instilled in the U.S. Forest Service.

As Pinchot saw as a young man, the U.S. Government had no formal forest policy and did little if anything at all to regulate or protect the forest. In his studies in Europe, Pinchot learned from well established foresters about the scientific principles of forest management; a well established profession and form of governance for European countries. In Europe, Pinchot saw wilderness under government control and managed in a scientific manner to preserve and utilize

the resources of a given country; all with the support of the people. It was there that Pinchot began to think about how he could apply his ideals and the concepts of forestry in the United States to preserve the vast wilderness of the country.

Pinchot recognized that in order for forestry to be a viable; he had to generate a change in thinking in the American culture. He embarked upon creating a culture that accepted forestry in several ways. Pinchot understood that complete conservation of the forest was not a plausible means to gain support from both the public and business. To gain public support, he tried to show the beauty of the wilderness by supporting artist that depicted the beauty of the areas. He also used the media of the time to educate the public on the virtues and ideals of preserving the forest. He gave credibility and validity to the profession of forestry by creating the first school of forestry at his alma mater, Yale, and created the first professional journal of forestry to gain credibility in the academic and scientific community. To gain support from the business community, Pinchot went about educating and consulting business on how to increase their timber yields and how to sustain their output over time.

Pinchot leveraged his relationships with political representatives to push policies that supported forestry and the control of wilderness areas under government control. Pinchot was recruited to run the Department of Agriculture's Division of Forestry in 1898. As an added incentive, he was told that he could run the division as he saw fit. When he took over the position, Pinchot began to assert his influence even further. It was Pinchot that lobbied to have formal control of the forests shifted from the Department of Interior where it was located

in a decentralized manner in which he had little control, to the Department of Agriculture where it would be completely under his control. It was not until 1905 that a series of decisions in his favor that official control of the forest was transferred to the Department of Agriculture.

Once transferred into his control, Pinchot was able to create the guidelines regarding the role of the agency, define the mission of the agency, hire all managers of the agency and direct the training and guidelines that employees would follow. He indoctrinated the agency with his ideals; he even changed the name of the agency from the Forest Reserves to the its present day U.S. Forest Service as a means to create more support for the agency through marketing it as a national service, with the peoples interest in mind.

It is clear that Gifford Pinchot's vision not only shaped the creation of the forest service over one hundred years ago, but also set the course for future generations of foresters and the public alike. By introducing idea that the land belongs to all through government oversight for preservation of that land and directed use, Pinchot created a dichotomy that very much exist today for the Forest Service; how to manage competing issues of conservation and use?

Organizational Mission

James Q. Wilson defines organizational mission as “a culture that is widely shared and warmly endorsed by operators and managers...” (p. 95). Wilson's definition of mission is somewhat different than the definition that is commonly expressed today; “the mission is the principle purpose of the

organization, and the very reason for its existence” (Anheier, p. 176). Wilson’s definition is likely more accurate and reflective of the true sense of mission.

The definition used by Anheier does not take into account the personality of the organization and relies heavily on a goal oriented approach. The purpose of the mission in this definition is to define the constraints of foresters and the rules in which they must perform their respective tasks to achieve an organizations goal. A mission and its parts are thought to be measurable and quantifiable as to measure the success of an organization achieving its mission.

Wilson’s definition embodies a psychological and social approach to defining mission. Culture is not something that is static and is definitely not something that is easily changed; whereas purpose or the reason of an organizations existence implies that the purpose of an organization is unitary and static. A culture is dynamic and embodies many characteristics that evolve over time and experience and adapt to the environments that surround them. Individuals within cultures also often come in to conflict with their surroundings and develop different personalities within a given culture. Wilson’s definition provides for interaction and adaptation of an organization to societal pressures and influence.

Pinchot masterfully defined the mission of the U.S. Forest Service broadly; “as he put it, ‘the use of the natural resources for the greatest good of the greatest number for the longest time.’” (Lewis, p. 52). Pinchot strategically defined the mission broadly; much like the writers of the U.S. Constitution, to allow for flexibility, adaptability and interpretation that would evolve and adjust to social

conditions and inputs of the people. In short, the mission of the agency was designed to operate within the confines of a democratic society and ultimately provide the greatest possible good.

Pinchot created a sense of mission in the new found agency by creating a new culture; not only for the organization but for American society as a whole. Pinchot created the profession of Forestry in the United States by training employees, creating the job rules and duties for the entire organization and also in the classroom through the School of Forestry at Yale University that his family founded and in which he created the course of study. He also educated the general public by using the media to alter the American culture and bring awareness to the issues of conservation and the virtues of the U.S. Forest Service. Ultimately, he created a culture that would support the U.S. Forest Service and allow him the freedom of autonomy to operate the agency with minimal public and political scrutiny for years to come.

Pinchot did not acquire organizational autonomy and freedom of action for himself and the U.S. Forest Service by accident. Not only did he create a profession based on his ideals and alter the American culture to accept forestry as a public good and science; Pinchot also used political influence to his advantage to free the agency from many bureaucratic trappings that plagued many government agencies.

To create political support, he knew that he would need the support of business and the public to influence the politics of the time. Pinchot supported policies that were both pro-business and pro-conservation as a means to satisfy

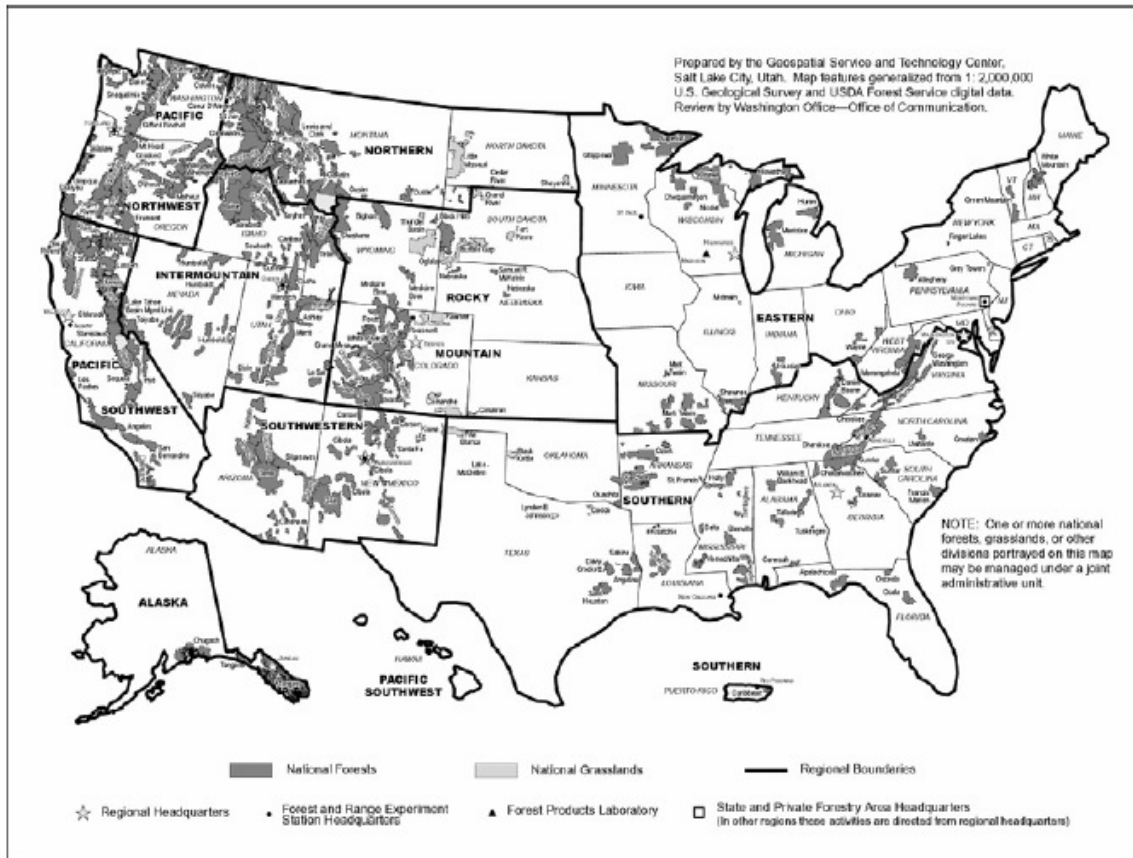
all stakeholders and create legitimacy. By providing solutions that were compromises to both sides of the issue, he gained many allies across the political spectrum.

Wilson points out that achieving freedom of autonomy allows for fewer constraints on the agency resulting in tasks that are defined by the goals of the organization and not the constraints. For the Forest Service, this meant that foresters and managers were able to conduct tasks that were meant to achieve the goal of the agency; to serve the greater good of the people. Even though there were minimal monetary incentives for foresters, they were satisfied with their jobs because they were able to operate with relative freedom and saw their job as meaningful.

As seen in the Greatest Good video, the organizational autonomy for the Forest Service could not last and did not last forever. The agency saw its autonomy slip away as the public and business became increasingly interested in the resources the forest service controlled. As political pressures rose and scrutiny increased, the bureaucratic trappings that the agency was free from began to invade the organization. Soon the field guide for foresters began to increase in rules and complexity as their jobs began to be defined by the constraints the organization was facing and not the actual goals. Unfortunately for the Forest Service, this was only the beginning of things to come.

The Forest Service Today

Pinchot's Forest Service staff of only a few hundred employees has evolved to over 30,000 employees today. The U.S. Forest Service is comprised of nine regions with each regional head reporting directly to the Chief of the Forest Service, who is a political appointee appointed by the President. Each region is made up of smaller Ranger Districts that are responsible for most on the ground activities. Ranger Districts vary widely in the number of employees, which can range from 10 to 100 and the actual size of the district, which can range between 50,000 and 1 million acres. In addition to the regions of the Forest Service, the agency also operates 133 Research Stations and Research Work Units. See map below for details on the regions and areas under Forest Service control.



The duties of the Forest Service are vast and cover a wide range of tasks; research, trail construction and maintenance, operation of campgrounds, wildlife and vegetation management and regional land use planning. Their tasks also include timber production, regulation of forest guidelines, fire prevention and management, road and capital construction and grasslands management. Not to mention, the Forest Service is responsible for training volunteers and educating the public regarding fire safety, protecting and managing waterways and managing recreation activities on forest lands; such as fishing, hunting, camping, hiking and motorized and non-motorized vehicle use. They also must issue licenses and collect user fees for recreational uses. It is clear that the wide scope

of services that the Forest Service provides while being held accountable by the legislature, the public and business is a difficult endeavor for employees and managers of the Forest Service.

Management

According to the U.S. Forest Service Budget Overview, “the Forest Service works to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation’s forests and grasslands by managing the 193 million acres that comprise our national forests and grasslands, by serving as the largest forestry research organization in the world, and by providing private landowners with technical and financial assistance that encourages sustainable forest management.” The mission of the organization is to “Sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation’s forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.” The goals of the Forest Service are:

- Reduce the risk from catastrophic wildland fire.
- Reduce the impacts from invasive species.
- Provide outdoor recreation opportunities.
- Help meet energy resource needs.
- Improve watershed condition.
- Conduct mission-related work in addition to that which supports the agency goals.

Today’s forest service looks markedly different than the forest service that Pinchot envisioned, yet it still bears the impression of Pinchot. As a matter of

fact, the Forest Service has evolved with the times and sustained its effort in conservation. The concept of the “Greatest Good” is still well in tact in the current mission of the Forest Service as it tries to preserve forest for future generations. However, the U.S. Forest Service has become a highly politicized agency, which has affected the organization and its management in several significant ways.

First, the Forest Service has a budget close to \$5 billion dollars that is reliant on federal government appropriations, which is a highly politicized process. Management constantly finds itself lobbying the legislature to preserve the agency budget and fight for its turf. With increased scrutiny by politicians eager to cut Forest Service funding for their own pet projects, management must show results. Management must create performance measures that will justify the agencies existence. This process causes more rules and restrictions on foresters in how they conduct their job and can alter the job altogether. For example, as illustrated in the table below, the Forest Service saw over \$175 million dollars cut from their budget by Congress last year, which led to reductions in all appropriation programs administered by the agency.

Appropriation Title	FY 2006 Enacted	Paycosts	Program Changes	FY 2007 Budget
Research	\$278,929	\$3,446	-\$14,584	\$267,791
State and Private Forestry	\$279,406	\$1,369	-\$36,365	\$244,410
National Forest System	\$1,403,391	\$19,618	-\$24,943	\$1,398,066
Wildland Fire Management	\$1,753,214	\$18,304	-\$3,323	\$1,768,195
Capital Improvement and Maintenance	\$434,687	\$4,206	-\$56,292	\$382,601
Land Acquisition	\$43,159	\$232	-\$17,032	\$26,359
Other Appropriations	\$8,186	\$52	\$1,068	\$9,306
Total Discretionary Appropriations	\$4,200,972	\$47,227	-\$151,471	\$4,096,728
Total Mandatory Appropriations	\$790,428	\$4,611	-\$25,971	\$769,068
Subtotal, regular appropriations	\$4,991,400	\$51,838	-\$177,442	\$4,865,796
Supplemental & Emergency Appropriations	\$57,000	\$0	\$0	\$0
Grand Total, Forest Service	\$5,048,400	\$51,838	-\$177,442	\$4,865,796

The courts have also played a major role in shaping today's Forest Service. As Pinchot used the courts to develop and strengthen the Forest Service autonomy and freedom of action, detractors of the agencies policies have used the courts to significantly hamper the service's actions. The Forest Service today frequently sees its efforts challenged in the courts, which slows down the decision making process and implementation of policies as well as constrains management from the ability to make decisions based on the science of the profession.

Today's foresters find themselves filling out piles of paperwork that documents their actions which takes them away from task that can be more productive to advancing the goals of the agency. When Pinchot created the first field manual for foresters that provided their job description and rules that they must conduct their respective function, it was only about one hundred pages and easily fit into the pocket of foresters in the field. Today, there are several manuals

of hundred of pages that direct foresters duties and the rules that they must perform them under.

Management today also must also engage themselves in managing public opinion. Getting public support for forest service policies will only further the ability for the Forest Service to complete their task. The problem is the public varies significantly on their ideas for land use and conservation. There is no clear consensus or middle ground that can be met to satisfy all parties. Local forest stations attempt to address local public needs in open forums and commissions that include diverse local interest. Many times the public is called to open meetings to vote on proposed management plans. However there are several problems with this process as many of the alternate proposals are not realistic and viable, so forest service management can get the proposal that they think is best passed. This is called framing the issue; however it does not truly take into account the publics interest. This process is also flawed because it actually can slow down the decision making process as public input calls for many adjustments to proposals before they are finally approved.

In terms of public opinion, the Forest Service has also marketed itself into a corner that they can not get out of. Many people view the forest service as fire managers and think of Smokey the Bear when they think of the Forest Service. The general public has no idea that the Forest Service is involved in the timber industry and actually generates income by cutting and selling timber or that it monitors the ecosystem of forest lands and can set limits on hunting, camping and motorized vehicle use. When the public finds out about the other programs

of the forest service a conflict usually arises. Its almost as if the public feels that the agency has misled them in some way.

The real problem of public perception simply lies in the fact that the Forest Service is an agency of multiple and conflicting bottom lines. There is no one program or task of the forest service that takes precedence over another. Many of the programs and task of the agency are on opposite ends of the use and conservation spectrum. This is why the agency has such difficulty politically, in the courts and in the public opinion polls.

With all of the difficulties facing the U.S. Forest Service, it is easy to dismiss the agency and call it ineffective, inefficient and a waste of tax payer dollars. However, to say any of these things is dismissive of all of the good that the agency has done and continues to do on a daily basis. Thanks to the U.S. Forest Service, there is an idea of something that is greater than the individual, something that is meant for the collective whole of our country. There are lands across the country that have been left relatively untouched and can be experienced by anyone that can get to them. Instead of thinking about what the forest service hasn't done, think about what would have been done without the forest service. It is only then that you can truly appreciate the value of the U.S. Forest Service for the country's past, present, and future.

References

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