FACT SHEET

No. 2

Timber & Timber Harvesting in West Virginia

October, 2002

West Virginia Forests and Forestland: Past and Present

When settlers arrived to stay in what is now West Virginia, forest growth on the 12.4 million acres was more or less in equilibrium with the old growth that was decaying or falling down presumably equaling new growth. Occasional fire or insect depredations would sometimes temporarily upset the equilibrium. An example of the latter occurred in the later 1800rds when approximately one-third (150,000 acres) of the State's virgin red spruce (*Picea rubra)* (468,999 acres) and enormous numbers of pines (*Pinus)* were killed by the southern pine beetle (*Dendroctonous)*. Another is the recent depredations of the Gypsy Moth (*Lymantria dispar*) which has resulted in a tremendous loss of tree volume growth as well as great, although localized, mortality of various tree species, especially oak (*Quercus*).

In the early 1800rds, there were probably less than 50,000 people in all of the area. Roads were little more than trails and railroads were just an idea. The thick forest and small amount of bottomland mandated that the settlers had to subdue the forest and conquer the steep slopes in order to have space in which to live. Consequently, trees were regarded as having a negative value and land with trees was worth less than land that had been cleared. Clearing involved hacking and girdling the trees or cutting and burning them. By 1869, there was 2,600,000 acres of improved cropland in West Virginia. This grew to 3,700,000 acres by 1879 and to 5,500,000 acres by 1900. Nationwide, the nation's farmers were clearing forest at an annual rate of 13.5 square miles per day between the years 1850 and 1910.

In 1900, West Virginia farmers produced nearly all of the food that was eaten in the State. By the mid-1930's the proportion was down to about 85% and by 1979 to 45%. It is undoubtedly much less now. The changes came with the discovery of oil, invention of the tractor, mineral fertilizers and hybrid seeds, and development of a transportation system which together made it much easier to produce the nation's food on fewer acres in the mid-west.

With the advent of the Shay engine, the remaining timber was removed and sawn into boards and cross ties for the westward moving frontier. One author (Michael

Williams, 1989) says quite correctly that "industrialization in America rose on the sheer abundance of wood."

Another (Gifford Pinchot, 1905), was even more emphatic – "The products of the forest are among the things which civilized man can not do without. Wood is needed for building, for fuel, for paper pulp, and for unnumbered other uses and trees must be cut down to supply it. It would be both useless and mistaken to try to stop the cutting of timber, for it could not cease without great injury, not to the lumberman only, but to

all the people of the nation. The question is not of saving the trees, for each tree must inevitably die, but of saving the forest by conservative ways of cutting the trees."

"The object of practical forestry is precisely to make the forest render its best service to man in such a way as to increase rather than to diminish its usefulness in the future."

"Forest management and conservative lumbering are other names for practical forestry. Under whatever name...it means both the use and the preservation of the forest."

As marginal farmland was abandoned, forests began to re-clothe the areas. By 1940 West Virginia farmland was down to nine million acres and by 1974 to between three and four million acres. Conversely, forested acreage increased. In 1950, forests occupied about 60% of the State, a figure that grew to about 70% by 1961 and which has now grown to nearly 80% (11,709,000 acres), making West Virginia the third most forested State in the nation. The state now has more trees and lumber volume than at any time in the last 100 years. Currently, state acres are growing twice as much volume as is being removed by harvesting.

The current cultural change is bringing new challenges. A technical forester has to solve ethical and political problems as well as silvicultural. He has to balance the values of society with the facts of science. What role should nonscientific societal input play? Can we predict the consequences? We must, or our grandchildren may not have the wood products and the sustainable forests that we now enjoy.

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