

FIRST DRAFT Colorado was at forefront of the fight for, and against, creation of national forests

When the Forest Reserve Act became law in the spring of 1891, it provoked only minor interest among Colorado newspapers, small news items tucked into larger stories about what was happening in the nation's capital.

Things changed six months later when the consequences of the act began to be seen in Colorado. When President Benjamin Harrison established the White River Plateau Timber Land Reserve on Oct. 16, 1891, the Meeker Herald called the action "a damnable outrage" and urged citizens of Rio Blanco County to rise up in opposition.

Other papers in the state joined the Meeker paper in opposing the designation of a 1.2 million-acre forest reserve. The Leadville Herald-Democrat said it would likely destroy the cattle industry in the region, and force an increase in taxes.

But opposition to the designation was far from universal. The Glenwood Springs Avalanche-Echo proclaimed the land ideal for such a designation.

The Denver Sun joined in supporting the reserve, declaring that "the White River plateau seems to have been designed by nature to have been reserved for a park." Many people at the time thought forest reserves were essentially national parks.

In any event, the designation was made, and the White River Plateau Reserve became the second forest reserve in the country. Harrison had designated the Yellowstone Park Timber Land Reserve — outside Yellowstone National Park — earlier in 1891.

By the time he left office in early 1893, President Harrison had created 15 forest reserves, including the Battlement Mesa Forest Reserve in December 1892.

Unlike the White River reserve, Battlement Mesa didn't generate much opposition. The Grand Valley Star newspaper did grouse about the designation, fearing it would interfere with wood and mineral production and halt home building on Grand Mesa. "This we cannot stand," the paper declared.

The Grand Junction News was less concerned. "There seems to be no valid objections to making these reserves, if they are diligently protected and if the requirements of the settlers are promptly met," it wrote a few weeks before the formal designation.

During the following decades, boundaries for the White River, Battlement Mesa and other reserves were enlarged and reduced in size several times. Meanwhile, disputes over the formation of the forests and their management continued as the number of forest reserves grew.

After President Harrison, "President Grover Cleveland established fifteen reserves during his term of office, and President William McKinley established twelve, but none of them



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An 1898 map of the Battlement Mesa Forest Reserve showed different types of timberlands and grazing areas available on the reserve, as well as rivers such as the Grand River on the north and the North Fork of the Gunnison to the southeast.

was in Colorado," wrote Forest Service historian Len Shoemaker.

President Theodore Roosevelt took things to an entirely different level. "He established 150 reserves, (14 of them in Colorado) which totaled about 148 million acres," Shoemaker wrote. "In fact, he became so enthusiastic in his campaign of withdrawals that the opponents of the conservation movement combined forces and, in 1907, induced Congress to revoke a part of the creative privilege granted to presidents."

Thereafter, congressional consent was required for a president to set aside a new reserve, or expand an existing one in the West.

Fierce battles also occurred when Roosevelt and his forestry chief, Gifford Pinchot, sought to impose grazing fees — then called grazing taxes — for ranchers who grazed their livestock on forest reserves. Some of the loudest critics were in Colorado.

None was more outspoken and opposed to forest reserves than Elias Ammons, a Front Range cattleman, politician and the leader of the anti-conservation movement in Colorado. He argued that the federal government had no right to "sequester vast tracts of land" in any state, or to assume management over those tracts.

Ammons confronted Pinchot face-to-face on a number of occasions, including in December 1905, in Glenwood Springs during a Colorado Cattlemen's Convention that Pinchot attended.

Grazing fees were the primary topic of discussion.

"Forester Pinchot, it is understood, was commanded by President Roosevelt to come to Colorado to ascertain the exact causes of the wholesale protests against the grazing tax," the Rocky Mountain News reported on Dec. 2, 1905.

Ammons, then a state Senator, declared that "the regulation of the

reserves as now enforced are not applicable to the conditions. It is not the cattleman who is the enemy of the forests, whether he is on a reserve or elsewhere. The cattleman does not profit by forest fires."

The average cattleman, already overburdened by taxes, would be ruined by the imposition of the grazing fee, Ammon added.

Other speakers argued that cattlemen alone were being asked to pay for the management of forest reserves, when the entire country benefitted from the reserves.

At the end of the meeting, Pinchot defended the grazing fees. He noted that the fees would only provide one-tenth of the cost of maintaining the forest reserves, so ranchers weren't being asked to fund all forest management. Also, he noted, cattlemen derived a direct benefit from being allowed to graze their livestock on forest reserves, "and therefore ought to pay for it."

But Pinchot did agree that the structure of the grazing fees could be modified in a way that would help smaller livestock operations without abolishing the fee, or tax.

That willingness to modify the fees won Pinchot support in newspapers from Denver to Delta. Pinchot, they said, "showed a disposition to meet the stockmen fairly on complaints regarding the regulations and promised numerous modifications to suit local conditions."

Later in December, Ammons traveled to Washington, D.C. to meet with President Roosevelt and Pinchot about the grazing fees. Accompanying Ammons was a rancher from Mesa County, Isaac Baier.

During the meeting, forestry officials told Roosevelt that "the stock interests of all the states but Colorado are satisfied with the new order and are willing to pay the charges imposed," according to The Daily Sentinel of Dec. 18, 1905.

However, the paper added, "The Colorado men do not believe other stock interests have taken this position."

Despite the opposition, Roosevelt and Pinchot began assessing grazing fees on forest reserves in 1906. They have continued to this day, as have disputes over how much the fees should be.

Additionally, the forest grazing fees became a model for the establishment of the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934, which established grazing fees on other federal lands.

When Congress curtailed presidential power to create new reserves in 1907, it also changed their names from reserves to national forests. The change was made, Shoemaker wrote, "To correct the erroneous impression of lands and resources held in reserve, when our policy is a controlled everyday use of them."

Locally, the Battlement Mesa Reserve became Battlement Mesa National Forest. But in 1924, it was renamed the Grand Mesa National Forest. It was combined with the Uncompahgre National Forest in 1954 and with the Gunnison National Forest in 1973. The combined three forests contain nearly 3 million acres.

Although disputes over management of forests continues in the 21st century, only a tiny minority argues today that creation of our national forests was a mistake.

Sources: "National Forests," by Len Shoemaker, Colorado Magazine, September, 1943; "Insurgency in Colorado: Elias Ammons and the Anticonservation Impulse," by G. Michael McCarthy, Colorado Magazine, winter 1977; "Establishment and Modification of National Forest Boundaries and National Grasslands: A Chronological Record, 1891-1996," historic newspapers at newspapers.com and coloradohistoricnewspapers.org.

Bob Silbernagel's email is bobsilbernagel@gmail.com.



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President Benjamin Harrison, above, and Gifford Pinchot, right.



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