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COMMUNITY FORESTS

FROM

“A NATIONAL PLAN FOR AMERICAN FORESTRY”

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COMMUNITY FORESTS

By C. R. TILLOTSON, District Forest Inspector

In preceding sections, national and State forests have been discussed. The Nation and the States are engaged in a big way in ownership and administration of forest lands. To a much lesser degree the same is true of the smaller political units. Several hundred towns, counties, boroughs, and cities in the United States today own forest land that is set aside for definite purposes and appears destined to remain in public ownership. Ordinarily such lands are called town or municipal forests, or county forests.

TOWN OR MUNICIPAL FORESTS

The town or municipal forests correspond after a fashion to the communal forests of Europe, and in numerous cases owe their origin partly at least to the enthusiasm aroused by glowing accounts of these European forests, how they served as recreation centers and game and bird sanctuaries, how they gave employment to many people, and above all yielded so much revenue from the sale of forest products that local taxes were unnecessary. There are such forests in Europe. The outstanding examples are rather large in size, one or two thousand acres or more, and the population of the fortunate proprietary community is small. That a comparatively large forest area which has been skillfully managed over a long period of years in Europe can support the governmental activities of a sparsely populated commune or municipality is entirely possible. Unfortunately progress up to the present time does not as yet hold much promise of similar developments in the United States in the immediate future at least.

The European commune corresponds closely to the New England town. In the New England States, outside of cities, the town or township is the important local political unit. It bears practically the same relation to the State government that counties do in most other States. The initiation of local public projects or activities, the raising of funds by taxes and indicating how these funds shall be spent are determined by a vote of the people in town meeting. Officials usually termed selectmen are elected to administer the affairs, expenditures are closely watched, and any project undertaken is usually carefully scrutinized. It is in this atmosphere that these publicly owned forests called town forests in New England have come into being in large numbers, where the idea is being actively nourished, and where they are already of local importance in one or more aspects.

Among the early, if not the earliest, States to authorize specifically the acquisition of municipal forests were Massachusetts in 1882, New Jersey in 1906, Pennsylvania in 1909, Minnesota, New Hampshire, and Indiana in 1913, and Vermont in 1915. Prior to specific legislation, however, there are records of town-owned forest land which met the specific purposes for which town forests are created.

One of these is the town of Danville in New Hampshire. To quote from the 1927-28 report of the New Hampshire Forestry Commission:

This town has one of the most unique town forest records of any in the State. For 158 consecutive years or since 1790 this town has appointed a parsonage committee which have had as part of their duty the management of 75 acres of forest land—one a 55-acre piece and the other a 20-acre piece. This committee cut and used the lumber for the building and maintenance of the first meeting house and parsonage. During these years the receipts from the sale of wood have been deposited in banks until the fund has now reached almost \$10,000. Every year at the March town meeting there is a warrant usually as follows: "To see how much of the parsonage fund the town will vote to spend for preaching for the year ensuing." Thus the town of Danville hires its own preacher and decides how much money they will pay him. * * *

The two tracts were probably set aside at the time the town received its charter and as was the custom in many towns were called the minister's lot. A careful study of the old parsonage committee records shows receipts from the sale of wood and timber up to about 1830. Many hundred dollars worth of timber is recorded as sold and used for repair of the meeting house, the parsonage and the fences about the two cemeteries. From 1830 until about 1880 the receipts came from rentals of pasture, the sale of rye and hay, making over \$1,000 from this use. In 1865 another growth of timber had matured and \$1,500 worth was sold at that time. In 1895 the records show that \$4,500 was received at auction for sale of timber on the 55-acre piece and the money deposited in the bank. In 1903, about \$1,200 was received from the sale of wood and timber on the 20-acre piece. With almost \$10,000 in the bank as a result of this careful management, can any one doubt the wisdom of these parsonage committees in holding on to their two tracts of forest land?

In 1897 the town of Woodstock, in New Hampshire, acquired 25 acres of well-timbered land surrounding its water supply, and has cut much timber for highway and bridge construction from it. The town of Newington, N.H., lists as a town forest a tract of 122 acres acquired as long ago as 1710. The city of Fitchburg, Mass., claims the distinction of having been the first in the United States to establish a town forest under a State law. This forest was created on December 29, 1914, with an area of 109 acres.

The town forest movement has received its greatest impetus in the last 10 years. During the period from 1922 to 1930, the Massachusetts Forestry Association was very active in the State in urging town boards of selectmen year after year to consider the desirability and possibility of a town forest, offering to plant 5,000 trees free of charge for any city or town which would legally establish a town forest of 100 acres or more. The New England Box Co. for several successive years duplicated this offer to the towns of Franklin County. Similar offers were made for more limited periods by the Middlesex Forestry Committee to towns in Middlesex County, and by the Springfield Chamber of Commerce and the Hampden County Improvement League jointly to towns in Hampden County. The Berkshire Forestry Association offered \$150 to each town in Berkshire County that would set up such a town forest. The result of these efforts in Massachusetts was to increase the movement of municipalities that had definitely entered land under the Town Forest Act from 4, at the beginning of 1923, to 90 aggregating 25,535 acres at the end of 1930. Some of these lands were already in town ownership. Some were acquired by purchase, by gift, and through tax reversion. In fulfilling its part of the contract, the Massachusetts Forestry Association planted 225,000 trees for 45 towns.

The State forestry departments of New Hampshire and Vermont have also urged such forests upon the town authorities. There was interest in this project in the highest circles. As late as 1930, previous

to the town meetings held in March, Gov. John E. Weeks of Vermont sent a letter to all town selectmen in respect to owning and developing town forests. Following this particular letter 12 towns in Vermont appointed committees to consider the matter and several others appropriated funds to buy lands or to plant trees on land already owned.

On December 7, 1928, a meeting was held in Boston and an organization perfected of the Massachusetts town-forest committees, the only one of its kind in the United States so far as is known. It meets yearly to discuss town-forest problems and to make a field examination of one or more town forests. It appears destined to keep the subject of town forests in Massachusetts very much alive. The Massachusetts State Forestry Department is cooperating closely and has offered to map and make 5-year plans for any of the town forests upon request from the town authorities.

In New York the town-forest movement has made even better headway, in respect to number and total area of such forests. Fully three fourths of the total number in that State consist of lands surrounding the municipal water supplies. Some outstanding examples are the areas owned and developed by New York City and by Glens Falls. The movement in New York doubtless was given its principal impetus by the State law providing that the conservation department should furnish trees free of charge for reforesting such publicly owned lands. The number, area, and distribution of town and municipal forests, so far as these are known, are indicated in table 1.

TABLE 1.—*Town and municipal forests in the United States*¹

Region and State	Forests	Area
	Number	Acres
New England:		
Connecticut	23	29,910
Maine	8	1,284
Massachusetts	90	25,535
New Hampshire	82	16,783
Vermont	42	9,000
Total	245	82,512
Middle Atlantic:		
Maryland	9	24,514
New Jersey		56,397
New York	390	170,500
Pennsylvania	33	30,728
Total	432	282,139
Southern:		
Alabama	1	600
Georgia	5	1,103
North Carolina	37	43,911
South Carolina	1	10,436
Total	44	56,050
Central:		
Indiana	6	6,150
Missouri	1	2,000
Ohio	23	22,000
Total	30	30,150
Lake:		
Michigan	45	1,660
Minnesota	1	3,000
Total	46	4,660
South Rocky Mountain:		
Arizona	3	14,254
Utah	1	4,000
Total	4	18,254
Grand total	801	473,765

¹ Not including a number of forests owned by cities in the Northwestern States to protect water supplies, about which data are lacking.

Thirty percent of the number of these forests and 17 percent of the area are found in the New England States, and 54 percent of the number and 60 percent of the area in the Middle Atlantic States. New York State alone accounts for 49 percent of the number and 36 percent of the area. This concentration is due to the firm belief in these regions in the benefits of a forest cover on the watersheds that furnish municipal water supplies, to a widespread and favorable public interest in public forests, and, in Massachusetts, to the active campaign put on by the Massachusetts Forestry Association.

Probably 50 percent of these forests, embracing 80 percent of the area, were acquired and developed primarily for the purpose of protecting the sources of municipal water supplies. There is intensive interest by their managers in protecting them from fire and even from insects, and in planting forest trees. About 68,000 acres of the total area have been planted. The communities in the New England and Middle Atlantic States are primarily dependent for their potable water supplies upon surface water that is collected in lakes and ponds. Its quantity and quality are a matter of vital concern to them. Efforts are not spared to keep this water pure and clean and to maintain a forest cover on the watershed.

In no case, so far as is known, have town or municipal forests in the United States been developed to the extent of those in Europe. They are usually made up of lands that needed planting when first acquired or of cut-over mixed second-growth timber that only years of careful expert management can bring to a highly productive state. The average size for the country as a whole is less than 600 acres; individually many are less than 200 acres and some less than 100 acres. The areas are too small to justify the employment of a technical forester to manage them. Occasional advice from consulting foresters is possible but so far as known has rarely been obtained. While State supervision or advice from the State technical staff might take care of that, it is true that at present town forests are legally subject to State supervision and direction in only two instances. The local man or men in charge of them may be perfectly capable of planting and protecting the lands but cannot be expected, without at least occasional technical advice, to go much beyond that stage in developing them. Because of their small size, their present condition, and the improbability of technical management, these forests are not now and do not yet promise to become very material sources of revenue to the political units that own them. Only the larger ones have potential possibilities in that respect. All of them will supply some timber and fuelwood—free fuelwood perhaps to the needy. Unless there are drastic changes in conception and administration, both of which are well within the realm of possibility, they are not destined to be of any material importance for timber production in the immediate future at least.

Town forests do create and hold local interest in the forest and in measures taken to protect them. That alone is worth a great deal. Most of them will continue to be given as good care as the men in charge are able to give. They will increase in number. Those belonging to growing municipalities which are obliged to extend their ownership of watershed lands, will increase in area. They could be and in some instances probably will become forestry demonstration centers of local interest and importance. Their chief value, and it is a

very important one, will lie in the protection that they afford municipal water supplies. That will give them a more important status than if their purpose were the production of wood alone.

Following in the wake of the State park, which is rapidly assuming an important role in State developments, the town forest will in congested sections almost certainly play the role of a town forest park, a recreation center where facilities will be provided for rest and amusement. It may also serve as a game and bird refuge, or for some similar purposes. The extent to which town forests may be developed for such purposes is beyond anyone's knowledge. Without doubt the need for and appreciation of such areas will be realized more keenly year by year, and it is entirely likely that relatively small areas will be set aside in increasing numbers by local communities with a view mainly to their recreation value, rather than timber growing. There is no doubt that they will be heavily patronized, and will render in this way one of the well-recognized services of the forest, and will be well worth their cost.

Any estimate of the cost of these lands and the current expenditures on them could only be the roughest sort of a guess. Some of the land was acquired by gift, some by purchase, some through tax-delinquency, some through converting the old, so-called town farms into town forests and so on. Perhaps it averaged \$4 to \$5 an acre, which would make the total original cost to the towns about \$2,000,000. The towns have been active in establishing forest plantations, which statistics show to aggregate about 68,000 acres. Since the towns ordinarily receive these trees free of charge from State nurseries, their actual expenditures for planting were probably about \$350,000. There is no method of estimating what is spent yearly on these forests. Some towns have given them very good care, especially if one of their functions was to protect the water supply. Funds have been spent not only for general oversight, but for taking care of insect infestations such as the white pine weevil.

COUNTY FORESTS

The number and extent of county forests, as estimated from available records are summarized in table 2.

TABLE 2.—*County forests of the United States*

State	Forests		Area
	Number	Acres	
Illinois.....	7	36,000	
Michigan.....	1	320	
New Hampshire.....		500	
New Jersey.....	5	10,203	
New York.....	34	18,384	
Pennsylvania.....	1	40	
Wisconsin.....	11	460,521	
Total.....	59	525,968	

It can hardly be said, in view of their small number and relatively small acreage, except in Wisconsin, that these forests are of great significance at present. Only in the four States of Illinois, New Jersey,

New York, and Wisconsin, does there appear to be any real movement looking to the ownership and development of such areas. In the other States the small areas mentioned usually represent some tract or tracts of land that are a part of the land owned by one or more of the county institutions. The Illinois area of 36,000 acres is mostly in Cook County and is in reality a forest park for the city of Chicago.

In New Jersey, county forests have been established largely for the same purpose, that is, they are recreational areas set apart for people living in the congested industrial centers.

In New York and Wisconsin, real impetus has been given to the county-forest movement by special legislation which provides for State participation in the expense. In New York State the legislation provides for State contributions up to \$5,000 a year to any county for the purchase of lands, for their reforestation, and for the protection of plantations or other forest growth thereon. While title to the lands is vested in the county, the State law provides that the area must be forever devoted to the purposes of watershed protection, of timber production, and other forest products, and for recreation and kindred purposes. This law is a close concomitant of another New York State law which provides for the purchase of lands for State forests. All lands owned or acquired by the county for the purposes mentioned are exempt from State and county taxes and for the purposes of all other taxes can be assessed at not to exceed the price paid for them, or, if acquired by gift, at the value thereof for forestation purposes but not exceeding the valuation as fixed upon the assessment roll 2 years prior to the gift. The board of supervisors of each county may sell trees, timber, or other forest products from these areas upon terms deemed for the best interests of the county and under such rules and regulations as may be prescribed by the conservation commissioner.

The three outstanding features of this law are (1) State participation in the purchase of land whose title is vested in the county; (2) the provision that the land must be forever devoted to the purposes for which it was acquired; and (3) the provision that sales of timber from the areas are subject to rules and regulations prescribed by the conservation commissioner.

In Wisconsin, tax-delinquent lands revert to the counties. From these lands, some 460,000 acres of county forests have been blocked out into forest units.

Wisconsin has definitely stimulated the creation of county forests. The forest-crop law of 1927 was amended in 1929 to permit the counties to list county-owned land as "forest-crop land." For every acre of land listed the State pays 10 cents annually to the township in which the land lies. The county pays nothing. As a further encouragement, the 1931 legislature ordered the conservation department to pay the counties an additional 10 cents to be used in the development of the forest units. Thus, every acre of county forest draws 20 cents of State money each year, 10 cents to the county and 10 cents to the township. The State in return is to receive 75 percent of the yield from the forests. County forests have been established in eight counties; other counties are hastening to get in on the arrangement.

In order to understand the alacrity with which the forested counties of Wisconsin are creating forest units, as well as properly to appraise

the possibilities of future development, it is necessary to look into the financial conditions of these counties. In Wisconsin, real-estate taxes are collected by the townships which pass the county share on to the county treasurers. Some of the county funds are then returned to the townships as county aid for schools, etc. A special law permits the townships to turn over the delinquent tax lists to the county in lieu of cash. Thus, from many heavily delinquent townships the county receives little or no cash or may even be in debt to the township. In one county in 1931 the county levy was \$140,000. Of this, \$41,500 was received in cash, the balance of \$98,500 in the form of delinquent tax lists. The county returned \$40,000 to the townships for school districts, which left a balance of only \$1,500 in cash for county purposes. The banks have refused further loans; the county is in distress.

When the county takes deed to the delinquent lands, as it is able to do after three years, the townships are no longer able to enter taxes against the lands and pass the charge on to the county. Thus, it is distinctly to the counties' advantage to take deed to the lands as rapidly as possible. If the land is then entered under the forest-crop law, both the county and the townships are further rewarded by the grant of State money. During the past year, counties have been taking deed to tax-delinquent land as rapidly as possible and are entering large blocks under the forest-crop law.

The purpose of the county forest law is good. The conservation commission is authorized to examine the areas offered for listing and determine that they are suitable for forestry purposes. It is empowered to supervise the expenditures of 10 cents per acre granted to the county for forestry purposes. The State is to receive three fourths of the yield from the forests. The disquieting phase of the arrangement is that most of the counties concerned are not financially able to enter into a forestry undertaking in any sort of an adequate way. They are not prepared to spend the funds necessary to make the land productive. There is little question but that the counties are taking up the plan primarily as a means of getting State aid.

The creation of county forests is a step in advance in that it involves a certain amount of rough zoning. It blocks up land which is unsuited to private development into forestry units and prevents further settlement in them. It stimulates local interest in forestry and it is probable that some progress will be made in developing some of the areas.

To men familiar with the forestry counties' financial situation in Wisconsin, however, and to those who have had contact with forestry undertakings of such local nature in other States, the county-forest plan seems to be but a transition toward State forests. It is possible that the units may remain nominally county forests for a long period of time, but the cost and responsibility for development must be largely assumed by the State.

The counties may become a more important factor in the Minnesota situation. Title to tax-delinquent land passes to the State in Minnesota after 5 years. In 1933, 4,000,000 acres will be involved. The State is to hold the land as trustee for the various taxing units in the proportion of the unpaid taxes. The State's equity in these taxes is usually less than 10 percent. There is a considerable disposition among the local county and township officials to feel that under

these circumstances the county should have the determining voice in regard to what is done with the land rather than the State. It remains to be seen what kind of division of responsibilities will be worked out in Minnesota.

As matters now stand there does not seem to be a well-defined national movement for the acquisition, retention, and development of county forests as productive pieces of forest property under county administration. The New York situation seems most clearly defined because of the rather generous financial participation by the State provided for by the law. The Wisconsin situation is clearly a social and economic movement designed to assist counties whose idle and delinquent tax land is simply overwhelming them. To assure success of the movement, additional funds and effort must be put into it.

Ownership and development of forest units by counties would have some advantages over ownership by the smaller town unit. Funds for the purpose could presumably be raised in greater amounts and larger areas could be acquired and maintained. Areas large enough to justify the employment of a technically trained forester might conceivably be set up in a great many counties. The possibility of developing public forests through setting aside tax-reverted land for that purpose is more pronounced in the case of counties than for any other political unit. In about half of our States, tax-delinquent lands revert to the county rather than to the State or town. Where State laws permit it, such lands of suitable character could be set aside as county forests. To be most effective, legislation should provide not only for designating some of such land as county forests, but make it easy and inexpensive for the county to take title to the land, and should provide for exchange of one parcel of land for another. This would facilitate blocking up a comparatively solid area of land as the county forest. Precise information is lacking as to the amount of land that has reverted to the counties for taxes but apparently it amounts to several millions of acres. Developing part of it for county forest purposes would be one means of putting it to a use that would make it a social and economic asset. It would serve largely the same purposes as the town forest already discussed, timber production in time, and meanwhile watershed protection and an area for public hunting and fishing and other forms of recreation. To be sure, all counties could not do this. Some could not finance such a project, even though compared to some other county activities, its cost would be insignificant. It would be necessary for the States to provide financial aid. To assure continuity of and ability in management, supervision by the State forester should be provided in these cases.