

Forest Reserve Act of 1891

In the spring of 1891, when Congress was debating the issue of land frauds (the illegal purchase or deceit in the homesteading of Federal land) related to the Timber-Culture Act of 1873 and several other homestead laws, a rider was attached to a bill to revise a series of land laws. This small, one-sentence amendment (Section 24) allowed the President to establish forest reserves from public domain land:

“SECTION 24—The President of the United States may, from time to time, set apart and reserve, in any state or territory having public land bearing forests, in any part of the public lands, wholly or in part covered with timber or undergrowth, whether of commercial value or not, as public reservations; and the President shall, by public proclamation, declare the establishment of such reservations and the limits thereof.”

Since referred to as the “Creative Act” or the Forest Reserve Act of March 3, 1891, it was used by President Harrison on March 30th of the same year to set aside the first forest reserve—the Yellowstone Park Timberland Reserve (now part of the Shoshone and Bridger-Teton National Forests in Wyoming). By the end of Harrison’s term as President in the spring of 1893, he had created 15 forest reserves containing 13 million acres. These forest reserves were the White River Plateau, Pikes Peak, Plum Creek, South Platte, and Battlement Mesa all in Colorado; the Grand Canyon in Arizona; the San Gabriel, Sierra, Trabuco Canyon, and San Bernardino in California; the Bull Run in Oregon; Pacific in Washington; and the Afognak Forest and Fish Culture Reserve in Alaska.

On September 28, 1893, his successor, President Grover Cleveland, added two forest reserves—the huge Cascade Range Forest Reserve and tiny Ashland Forest Reserve—totaling 5 million acres—in Oregon. Cleveland did not add any more forest reserves for almost 4 years, until Congress was willing to pass legislation to allow for the management of the public forests.