4-3-1897

The New Forest Reservation

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The New Forest Reservations

Written for the Mining and Scientific Press by John Muir.

Uncle Sam is trying to save his forests—what is left of them—and at the same time trying to find out how best they can be put to use and kept in use forever for the benefit of miners, farmers, lumbermen and the people in general. But the problem, though simple looking enough in theory, is a very difficult one on account of widely varying conditions and interests, and the general apathy and blindness of those whose interests are not immediately involved. In the meantime the demands made on the forests for timber grow heavier every year, while the area of the forest lands is rapidly being diminished and all kinds of waste and destruction go on, not only unchecked but with accelerated speed.

Running fires consume probably from five to ten times as much timber as the axe, even under present wasteful methods of lumbering, and as new settlements are made and the woods are more generally invaded these fires, of course, become more frequent and destructive. It needs no prophet, therefore, to see that unless protective measures be speedily invented and applied our magnificent forests, once thought inexhaustible and as little in need of protection as the ocean, will in a few decades be utterly destroyed.

On the Atlantic slope and in the middle West much of the land was cleared for farms, the soil being fertile, and bread, rather than timber, being required; but very little of the remaining forest lands are fit for agriculture, and when cleared become desolate and give rise to floods. At present most of the forest-bearing lands still belonging to the United States are in the great mountain chains of the West. Some of these, on the Coast ranges facing the ocean, are comparatively free from fire on account of copious rainfall, but the Rocky mountain region is dry and is swept every summer by tremendous fires. The timber is inferior, but of vast importance, nevertheless, covering, as it does, the fountains of our great rivers and supplying the mines of this rich mineral region and the farms in the adjacent lowlands.

Every interest demands a new departure in the Government's management of its forest property. As Mr. E. A. Bowers, formerly inspector of public lands, well says, "the time is ripe for the introduction of some intelligent policy. Some of the very men who have been the devastators of our finest forests begin to see the folly of their course, and fear that sooner or later there will be no material for the lumber trade. They are ready and willing to pay the Government a reasonable price for timber which can be properly sold, and aver that some system by which they can cut timber under authority of law is a necessity. The more intelligent pioneers of the arid regions realize that the regular flow of the streams throughout the whole season, furnishing water for irrigation through the summer drought, is changing into torrents of a few weeks' duration in the spring which carry destruction by their flood and wash away the fertile soil, and then suddenly subsides and disappears when most needed."

Thus settlers, lumbermen and miners alike call for reform, and the reform required is now being earnestly and thoroughly studied by the Forestry Commission appointed by the National Academy of Sciences at the request of the Secretary of the In-