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REMEMBERING OUR ROOTS

Greatly Increased Timber Prices. Economic Hardship and Disruption of the Timber Supply. Imminent Extinction of Timber Species. Danger to Wildlife. Impending Timber Famine! Do these sound like headlines from the newspaper or a TV-featured news story? They could be, but actually they constituted the message of Gifford Pinchot and other United States conservationists at the turn of the century. These concerns were the driving force for the establishment of the Forest Service in 1905 by Teddy Roosevelt, with strong political support from Pinchot's friend, John Muir of the Sierra Club.

Today's headlines do look like a century ago, but is the situation really the same? Some things are very different. Today, the infrastructure for handling forestry-related problems is much more sophisticated than in the past. We now have forestry programs in universities across the country. We have scores of government laboratories specializing in forestry research. We have sophisticated methods for growing, counting, harvesting, and processing trees. And we have improved our understanding of the interaction of the forest with wildlife, climate conditions, and soil nutrients.

If we have realized all of this improvement and change, why are the problems still the same? Part of the answer is that there has been change in the social and political arena in our country that creates new climates for growing "problems." For example, the past several years have been a marked growth in the general concern about conservation of natural resources. Popular jargon is changing from interest in "novel products" and "industrial competitiveness" to new buzz words such as "sustainable forestry" and "ecological biodiversity." These new conceptions have major impact on the forest products industry and raise new alarms about old problems.

What should be different today is that a larger and more sophisticated body of forestry products

researchers should be able to help society more effectively use its timber resources in today's environment. We are at a time when demand for wood products is increasing, but the money spent on forest products research and education is being reduced. For example, a recent SWST white paper, "Wood Science and Technology: A Profession at a Critical Point in History," expressed grave concern about the declining focus on wood science and technology in the United States. Forest products-related companies have been reducing their research capabilities, and government laboratories continually face reduced funding. At a time when strong input is needed from all aspects of wood science and technology, we appear to be weaker and discounted as a source of information and direction.

With an increasing world population and the global desire for more commodity goods, forest products are going to be needed more than ever. Wood scientists and forest products technologists are the best equipped to offer solutions and alternatives to the effective use of our timber resources. So it may be that the solution to current problems is to return to some ideas from a century ago. Today we need new partnerships of government, associations, and others to strengthen our position in a highly competitive world, just as partnerships were used a century ago. In addition, we have to play a more active role in educating important constituencies such as scientists in other disciplines, academics, and political leaders about the importance and benefits of the profession of wood science and technology. Efforts are underway to adapt lessons of a century ago to our current situation. As an officer of SWST, I commit myself to utilizing the roots of our past to create positive change for today.

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