

The Forest Service Flag

The Forest Service has had its own flag or ensign for more than 70 years. It consists of a white coniferous tree inside a white shield, surrounded by a circle of 13-white stars, all on a blue background. At one time it came in three sizes. Display of the flag has varied over the years, but was first used on Forest Service power launches along the Alaskan coast, which is the only area where it is still in use today.

Use of a flag and the design was approved by Gifford Pinchot and his staff in 1909, 5 years after it had been first suggested. Although green was preferred, blue was used because there was no stable green dye at the time that would not wash or fade out too rapidly. The colors were those used then by the U.S. Geological Survey field parties.

The flag became an issue for Pinchot and his assistants in May 1909 because William Langille, first supervisor of the National Forest in southern Alaska, was already using a medium-sized one of his own design on the boat he had finally gotten approval for after some difficulty a few years earlier. Langille considered the flag necessary to identify his craft on the many trips he had to make around the islands and peninsulas of his vast and thinly settled domain. Boats were the only practical means of routine travel there before the day of the modern airplane. He had received conditional permission to use his flag from his superior, Edward T. Allen, first District (now called Regional) Forester in Portland, Oregon. Allen had sent his recommendation for approval, along with a copy of the design, to Pinchot early in the spring of 1909. It was considered by the Service Committee on May 12, with Pinchot absent, and disapproved. Allen was told to withdraw his permission. However, on May 19, with Pinchot present, this action was reversed and they agreed to review the design and encourage other designs. The one still in use was soon approved.

The flag apparently soon came into fairly general use at field locations and later (in miniature) on certain official vehicles. Arthur Ringland of Chevy Chase, MD, saw the medium-sized flag flying on Forest Service boats in southeastern Alaska when he was there in 1916 on an official inspection trip. Ringland also recalls seeing the large size flag flying during that period at ranger stations in the States. A 1917 photograph taken inside the Baseline wireless station in Arizona shows a large (about 24-inch by 36-inch) Forest Service flag tacked against a wall. And a 1919 photo of the first auto, a Ford pickup, purchased by District (Region) 2 in Denver, Colo., shows a Forest Service flag about 9 inches by 13 inches, flying from a staff attached to the radiator cap. Dr. Richard E. McArdle, retired Chief of the Forest Service, recalls the flag being used occasionally on official cars during the 1920s and early 1930s, usually mounted on a front fender.

Chief William Greeley said in his mimeographed National Forest Manual of October 20, 1923 (p. 34) that, "The use of the Forest Service flag at stations, camps, and on launches is encouraged," and "Various sizes of flags may be had on requisition." The Manuals of February 1926 and July 1928 continued these references, as did later ones into the mid-1930s. Sometime thereafter, probably during the World War II period, all mention of a Forest Service flag was deleted from the Manual. Its use at ranger stations and forest supervisors' offices had declined during the 1920s, and on cars during the 1930s.

However, the medium-sized flag, 18 inches by 28 inches, continued to be used on Forest Service ranger launches on the Tongass and Chugach National Forests in southern Alaska. It was usually flown off the bow signal mast, and the U.S. flag from the stern, or the starboard side. Although many Forest Service veterans did not believe it was still in use anywhere today. A recent check with the Alaskan Regional Office in Juneau revealed that it is still being flown on old ranger boats in the region. A number of men who used the ranger boats during their tours of duty in the Region became quite attached to the flag and some have kept them well-worn ones as souvenirs of their experiences. Otherwise the Forest Service flag is scarce in the Lower 48 states.

This summer three old flags were found at Bismark on the Priest Lake Ranger, Kaniksu section of the Idaho Panhandle National Forest. One was in good condition and is being put on display. The Alaska Region recently furnished the History Section with a new nylon Forest Service for the history collection in the Washington Office. It will be framed and displayed with other memorabilia including the original large bronze badge, in the conference room in the South Agriculture Building.

Forest Service employees frequently write in to headquarters offices to suggest an official flag or ask if there has been one. It would seem that the flag has reverted to its most valid use, on boats along the Alaskan coast, where its need was first felt. From records of meetings of Pinchot and his staff now in the National Archives, it appears that the question of adopting a distinctive flag first arose at the meeting of March 3, 1904 when the agency was still called the Bureau of Forestry, and the forest reserves were still under the old General Land Office of the Interior Department. It was suggested that it would be useful for field parties. This suggestion and one for a uniform for use in field work were referred to a subcommittee. A uniform was approved in 1906, but no further reference to a flag is found in the minutes of the staff meetings until the summer of 1907 when a new committee was appointed to consider it. The committee prepared a report, but not mention is made of its content. Opinion was probably divided as it was when the question next came up in the spring of 1909. By that time several suggested models had been designed, including Langille's, and one was finally chosen. The design has remained unchanged since then.