

September 1, 1919.

MEMORANDUM FOR DISTRICT FORESTER:

Selway Fire - 1919

In order to sum up the fire situation on the Selway National Forest, it is necessary to review the past four years to a limited extent, since each of the past four years, 1916, to 1919 inclusive, have been more or less severe fire seasons.

While the season of 1916 was not a severe fire season on other Forests and there was a considerable precipitation throughout the country there was a strip along the upper Selway River extending from Moore Creek to Ranning Creek that was not visited with precipitation from June to August, several small fires started along the river and it was necessary to employ about 100 men from Darby to handle the situation. A heavy rain early in August relieved the situation.

The season of 1917 was somewhat similar with the exception that the entire Forest was affected. From July 15 to September 15 there was very little precipitation, and as a result we had five very stubborn fires, --the Fish Creek, Fish Butte, Three Link, Coolwater and Shearer Peak. The organization was in place when the first fire started by the Three Link fire started early in July before the patrolmen were in place. However, it was satisfactorily controlled by man power.

The other four were the result of the inefficiency and dishonesty of patrolmen who had a decided tendency toward I. W. W. tactics, in fact it was subsequently proven that F. W. Figley, who was largely responsible for the Fish Creek and Fish Butte Fires getting beyond control, was a member of that organization. The Fish Creek fire was controlled by natural barriers, but the Fish Butte and the Coolwater fires were never controlled until fall rains extinguished them.

The season of 1918 opened with a large number of small fires on June 12, before any of the organization was in place, of which the Rocky Ridge, Gedney Creek, Castle Butte, Meadow Creek, Fire Creek, Rhoda Creek and two fires along the Selway River, were the most troublesome. Several factors entered into the situation that seriously hampered the operations upon all of these fires. First patrolmen could not be secured from any source, due to the fact that practically all local men previously used for this work were in the army or subject to draft and could not be used, and we were forced to utilize old men, boys and men selected from the fire crews, which in most every case were I. W. W.s and unfit for the work. After the fires could not be controlled by local men, shipments were made from Spokane, with the result that the crews were practically all I. W. W.s or their sympathizers. The tactics followed by these men were very demoralizing and consisted of their quitting the work at the very moment when the fire was

about to be placed under control. These different times the Gedney Creek fire was practically under control and at the psychological moment from 5 to 15 would leave the camp on some trivial pretext and the work would be lost. On the Three Devils fire the same conditions prevailed until every Spokane man was discharged from the line and local men were secured when the fire was quickly controlled.

The Fire Creek fire was handled entirely by Spokane men and burned gracefully and efficiently until extinguished by heavy rains on July 25 to 26. The experience gained that season was right on the ground and by personal contact with these crews since I personally visited most of these fire camps and Assistant District Forester, Glenn A. Smith, handled the Keeskia office during my absence. As a result of this experience I found that unless men shipped in from Spokane and many other points were given more hours than they worked, furnished transportation whenever they decided to leave the work regardless of the fact that their services were badly needed, allowed to do pretty much as they pleased and one of their own gang was placed in charge of them, they would refuse to work and would do everything in their power to injure the administration of the Forest and me personally. However, I absolutely refused to allow the Forest Service to be defrauded in any such manner regardless of the consequences to myself or the administration. Every man refusing to do his work

was immediately discharged. Not one man not known to be perfectly favorable and of which there was any question as to his loyalty was permitted to have charge of a bunch of men where I could prevent it.

While this policy caused considerable dissatisfaction among the I. W. W. element and rendered me very unpopular with them, I still maintain that it was the right and only policy and if persisted in will bring results.

As a result of the experience gained during the seasons 1916, 1917 and 1918, all of which were relieved by rain early in the game, the following decision was reached:

If first class local men can be obtained, practically any fire can be controlled if it is reached before it covers more than 500 acres and weather conditions are not abnormal. That men belonging to the I. W. W. organization and their sympathizers, which element composes the larger part of all crews shipped from Spokane and other cities for fire fighting purposes are absolutely useless for that purpose and are a useless expense to the Forest Service and the Government in general.

With the past experience well in mind, preparations for the season of 1919 were started as soon as the business for 1918 was closed. Elaborate fire plans were arranged. The personnel of all crews and patrolmen were selected with care and careful consideration and all maintenance and protection

work were started at the earliest possible date that climatic conditions would permit. The maintenance work was started along the river at low altitude and pushed into the high mountains as rapidly as the snow disappeared and we could get there. Every tool cache and lookout point was made ready as soon as it could be reached. While we did not anticipate a bad fire season we had decided to take no chances and be caught as we were the year before. The patrolmen were all selected and either in their places or on improvement work where funds were not available from the patrol allotment by June 15. They were an excellent body of men and when the fact that there were over seventy of them is considered and that only approximately four were found unfit for the work the efficiency of the organization cannot be questioned. On June 19 a thunderstorm visited the Forest and started 14 fires all of which were extinguished by the regular organization except one located on Running Creek, which in the most inaccessible part of the Selway Forest. The services of every man on the Bear Creek District were utilized to handle three fires which were set near Running Creek on the Selway River ^{and} during their absence another fire started on Bear Creek near the mouth of Cub Creek and we decided to order fire fighters from the Bitter Root Valley. Twenty-five men were sent from Missoula via. Cemo and Ranger Devan who was on the Upper Selway in the Nezperce Division of the Bitterroot Forest came to our assistance on the fire on Running Creek with

18 men. Additional men for this fire were ordered from Missoula. The fire on Bear Creek which was known as the Cub Creek fire was eventually controlled but not until approximately 50 men were employed upon it.

James Girard was sent in from the Missoula office and took charge of the Running Creek fire and it developed that the last men went in were liberally sprinkled with agitators and undesirable characters. When the fire was practically under control they demanded 14 hour pay for 12 hours work, and when refused left the work and the fire was subsequently scattered by winds and resulted in one of the most destructive fires that ever visited the Selway Forest. As soon as we determined that the fire could not be controlled, all men were withdrawn and used to protect the Bear Creek watershed and the Indian Lake territory which carries a large body of merchantable timber. The control of the Cub Creek fire and the Running Creek fire along Paradise Creek amply justified all expenditures made in the Bear Creek District, since there is approximately 250,000,000 feet of merchantable timber on the Bear Creek watershed alone.

The fires occurring in June were all extinguished and no other fires occurred on the other portion of the Forest until July 13. The organization was in place and was supplemented by improvement and maintenance crews in several places and was in first class working order. On that date a severe electric storm passed over the western portion of the Forest,

starting seven fires in the Middle Fork District near Bimmerick Meadow. One near Indian Post office in the Fish Lake District and three on Fire Creek, Split Creek in the Coolwater District and three near Anderson Butte in the Meadow Creek District. The fires near Bimmerick Meadows were in a heavily timbered and very rough country and a country with an exceedingly heavy growth of underbrush. On Fish Butte within three miles of this territory was a lookout and two smoke chasers. At Canyon Creek, within 12 miles, was the District Ranger, two smoke chasers and six improvement men. At Pete King Station within 17 miles was one smoke chaser. Past experience had demonstrated the difficulty of fire control in that territory. These fires occurred about 5 P M and the men on Fish Butte, at Canyon Creek and Pete King were ordered to them as quickly as possible. Five of them were quickly extinguished but two on the steep slopes near the Leeksa River were not located for two or three days, and as a result spread rapidly.

Directly opposite these fires on the other side of the Leeksa River and on Fire and Split Creeks two more fires occurred. The smoke chaser at Coolwater was ordered out and six men located at Louse Lake on improvement work were sent as soon as they could be communicated with. The fire on Split Creek covered 25 acres when reached by the Coolwater smoke chaser and the fire in Fire Creek was approximately the same size when reached by the improvement men. On July 15 men were ordered from Lewiston for

Bimmerick Meadows and several local men were secured for the Fire Creek fire. The fire below Bimmerick Meadows covered approximately 1000 acres when the ten men ordered from Lewiston arrived. On July 17, 25 men were ordered from Spokane and on the same date a high wind arose and scattered the Fire Creek fire over approximately 10,000 acres, driving all men away from it and to safe places. On July 18, 32 men arrived from Spokane for the Bimmerick Meadow fire and were sent to Pate Kind station en route to the fire. At that point they demanded 14 hour pay for 12 hour work and when refused, returned to Koeskia, with the exception of four men, practically all of these men returning were members of the I. W. W., and some of them were employed upon the Forest during the season of 1918.

In company with Fire Chief Elers Koch, we looked over the Fire Creek fire and decided that it was practically useless to try to extinguish it but agreed that 50 men could be used in preventing it spreading into a body of heavy cedar along the Leehsa River. However, we were never able to secure the men and the work was abandoned.

There was still hopes of handling the Bimmerick Meadow fire and since the Leehsa drainage carries approximately one billion feet of merchantable saw timber we decided to try to extinguish that fire and approximately 50 men were placed upon it. Had the 32 men originally ordered for this fire been

local men instead of I. W. W.s and gone to the fire it would have been controlled.

In the meantime 20 men were secured from Missoula by way of Lolo Hot Springs for the Indian P. O. fire and ten men obtained from the same place were transferred from a small fire on the Elk Summit District to the Indian P. O. fire and it was eventually extinguished. On July 23 at 9:00 P M another fire started on Fish Creek and at 5 a m on July 23 covered 80 acres. The Fish Creek drainage, which is a part of the Lochsa drainage, carried a considerable body of white pine, cedar and spruce timber and we placed approximately 50 men upon the fire, most of which were shipped from Miles City, Montana. All attempts to control the fire were futile and the men were eventually sent out to avoid undue expenditure of Government funds.

On August 4 two fires were located, one on Pete King Creek and another on Canyon Creek. These two fires threatened the entire lower Lochsa drainage from the confluence of the Selway and Lochsa Rivers to Fish Creek, all of which is an exceedingly heavily timbered country carrying heavy stands of spruce, fir and cedar, and is the most accessible timber upon the Forest. Three bunches of men were ordered for these two fires from Spokane and consisted principally of I. W. W.s and their sympathizers. Each one of these crews remained at the work until the fire was practically under control and then demanded 14 hour pay for 12 hour work, or other conditions equally

as impossible and left when they were refused. A bunch of men shipped from Miles City, Montana, were transferred to the Cedars fires on Canyon Creek and it was completely extinguished after the Spokane men had refused to work. The Pete King fire spread over a large area and was abandoned about August 25, and sufficient men were retained to protect the settlers along the Lochsa and Selway Rivers and the trails and telephone lines along the principal travel routes.

The fire on Fire Creek had backed up onto the Ridge and was sweeping around the front to the South into the Selway drainage in which there was ranging about 1000 head of cattle and 15,000 sheep. Forty men were transferred from the Pete King and Bimerrick Meadow fires to protect this live stock if possible and we have been successful so far.

When the immense area drained by the Lochsa River and its tributaries is considered, the fact that it is practically all heavily timbered, is a drivable stream and all timber can be marketed, the expenditure of all funds made in that drainage can readily be justified. Had we lost every fire in the drainage the continued expenditure up until August 20 would hardly have been justified, but our success with five fires around Bimerrick Meadow, the Indian P. O. fire and the Cedars fire on Canyon Creek, indicated that the situation could be controlled if taken in time and the proper kind of men obtained. The failure on the Pete King fire was the result of I. W. W. activities entirely and can be contributed to no other

cause, since we had two walkouts when the fire was practically under control. Further, there is every reason to believe that the Cedars and Pete King fires were of incendiary origin and were set by men shipped into the locality for fire fighting purposes. This statement is borne out by the fact that one of these bunches of men leaving the Cedars fire started another fire on their way out which was discovered and extinguished.

On August 20 a fire which had been burning for several days and on which we had been working six men, located about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles from the west boundary of the Forest on the south side of the Middle Fork of the Clearwater River, was caught by a heavy wind and driven across the trenches upon the Forest for a distance of three miles. Also several fires located in the Clear Creek drainage along the boundary between the Helway and Nezperce Forests were giving considerable trouble and 40 men were secured for these fires, practically all of which were shipped from Wallace, Idaho. Excellent results were obtained upon all of these fires.

On August 30 the Tahoe fire was well under control and had been prevented from spreading to large areas of valuable timber on Clear Creek and along the south side of the Middle Fork River, and several smaller fires in the Clear Creek drainage had been controlled and extinguished. This fully justified all expenditures made for men shipped for these fires since the entire Clear Creek drainage was threatened and

is a heavily timbered area readily accessible. The protection of settlers, grazing permittees and National Forest improvements, such as bridges and telephone lines along the Selway and Lochsa Rivers, has seemed just grounds for the retention of about 50 men in that territory for the last 10 days, even after the fires along the Lochsa River were completely out of control and we have been successful so far, since the loss of all of these items has been negligible.

Another feature that it is desirable to mention in the excellent service rendered by about 30 returned soldiers which we had in our regular patrol organization. Without hardly an exception they have rendered excellent service and their loyalty and devotion to the Forest Service are commendable and these men should be considered when building protective organizations in the future. They have been given no privileges nor extended no favors that have not been forthcoming to the other men upon the Selway, nor do they desire sue

General Summary

My experience during the past four years has caused me to arrive at some pretty definite conclusions.

1. That fire seasons such as 1910 and 1919 will occur from time to time when the control of fire upon the National Forest is a physical impossibility.

2. That fire protection must depend entirely upon patrolmen carefully selected and upon the ground and a few carefully selected local men.

3. The expenditure of large sums of money by shipping in itinerant fire fighters and inexperienced men from cities and other places is a waste of government money and should be discontinued by the Forest Service at once, especially is this true of I. W. W.s and their sympathizers.

4. That the Forest Service must abandon certain inaccessible and sparsely timbered areas and confine all their attention to protecting readily accessible and valuable timbered areas.

5. That they must strive to perfect some mechanical contrivance such as the aeroplane and patent chemical extinguishers in order that fires may be handled more quickly and effectively.

6. Experts for fire protection must be developed at the expense of Silviculture and other theorists that cannot function until the forests are thoroughly and effectively protected from fires.

7. That every available area must be grazed to full carrying capacity to aid in fire protection even at the expense of wild game, since the fire destroys the very thing which we are seeking to protect by closed areas.

8. That a careful system of keeping close check of all forest users and visitors during the fire season be de-

vised and rigidly maintained even to the point of barring all strangers from certain areas during certain periods. This is based on the assumption that a large number of our most destructive fires are annually started by unscrupulous parties deriving employment in the capacity of fire fighters.

9. The protection of watersheds not necessary for irrigation purposes must be abandoned and timber necessary for the present generation protected at all times, since the penalizing by taking of the present generation for the future is destroying our chances of practicing scientific forestry for the benefit of the public in general.

/s/ Chas F. Howell.