

Oct. 22, 1931

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Big Losses Suffered This Year By Forest Fires, Says Region Forester

ONE THOUSAND five hundred and thirty-seven forest fires—more than 21 each day—scattered over a rough, mountainous and inaccessible country, larger than the states of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Jersey, Delaware, Vermont and New Hampshire combined, were fought and conquered by the forest service in region one, with headquarters at Missoula, during the summer of 1931, according to reports issued last week by Evan W. Kelley, regional forester at Missoula.

One thousand three hundred and ninety-one of these fires—more than 90 percent of the total—were put out before they had reached ten acres in extent, the report reveals. This was accomplished, it is said, despite unfavorable weather conditions—including high temperatures and unusually low humidities—which reduced the moisture content in duff, slash and down logs on the forest floor to less than 10 percent for a period of 65 out of the 72-day fire season.

Greater dryness than this, according to official records of the U. S. Priest River Experiment station, seems inconceivable in any climate which permits of forest growth.

It took 1,275 miles of fire trail to surround these fires; enough, stretched end to end, to reach from Butte to St. Paul, Minn., or from San Diego, Calif., to Salem, Ore., according to forest service figures.

Eleven men lost their lives, records show, on these fire lines—almost one death per hundred miles of line built; eleven lives were lost in the fight to keep forests green for the enjoyment of hunter, fisherman, camper and tourist in Montana and northern Idaho.

Heaviest loss of life was on the Waldron fire, on the headwaters of Teton river, in the Lewis & Clark national forest. Here, according to the records, five men were caught by a sudden rush of the flames. They perished on August 25 and after the coroner's inquest bodies were interred at Great Falls and Chouteau.

Burning snags, treacherous, flaming dead trees standing beside fire trails that must be built, caused four other deaths on four widely scattered fires. The tenth man lost his life on the Skalkaho grade in the Bitter Root forest and the eleventh was hurled to death as a bus—with 20 firefighters aboard—sped up a steep and narrow motorway toward the French creek fire.

Tourists and campers were responsible for 288 forest fires during 1931, through carelessness with pipes, cigars, cigarettes and camp fires, official figures reveal. This is a larger number, from such causes, than has ever before been reported by the forest service in the national forests of Montana and northern Idaho, according to forest officers. Railroads are reported as responsible for 61, four are laid to logging operations, 43 to unauthorized burning of brush and debris during the hazardous summer season, 121 were the work of incendiaries, 65 started from unknown causes, and lightning set a total of 955 fires.

The Deer creek fire was the largest, it is said. Starting 20 miles northeast of Bonners Ferry this conflagration swept out of control with high winds, crossed the Montana line into the headwaters of the Yaak river, and finally reached the Canadian border. It is estimated that more than 175 miles of line was constructed on this fire; more than 1,600 men toiled for weeks before it was

coralled and the blaze extinguished.

The McPherson fire, which started on the Coeur d'Alene national forest, was another large one, with 100 miles of fire trail built by more than 1,200 men. It was stopped on the headwaters of Pilgrim and Elk creeks, in the Cabinet forest, just before it reached the towns of Heron and Noxon, on the Clarks Fork river, the report states.

Greatest loss of ranch property was experienced in the Freeman lake fire, on the Kaniksu national forest, according to forest officials. Here, according to their records, 34 families were burned out in three days—more than 100 peo-

ple left homeless and largely dependent through the coming winter upon the Red Cross and the charity of kindly neighbors.

It was in this fire that Ed Dailey buried his wife and two children in their potato patch, covering them over with earth and putting wet sacks over their faces to keep them from being burned to death. Next morning he dug them out and they reached Priest River in safety.

More than 24,000 acres were burned in this Freeman lake fire and it took 90 miles of fire trail to surround it, it is said. Reports indicate, however, that most of this acreage was outside the Kaniksu national forest; that government losses were confined to about 8,000 acres.

Total area burned by fires handled by the forest service in Montana and the northern part of Idaho in 1931 was 171,910 acres, according to the report. Of this amount, 91,115 acres were in northern Idaho, and 80,795 acres were in Montana.

Damage to national forest property

includes, according to estimates now compiled, destruction of 40 million feet of timber, valued at \$120,000, and of forest telephone line valued at \$2,000. Tentative figures from co-operating agencies estimate additional losses on fires not handled by the forest service at \$121,000. This latter figure includes \$86,000 as the value of 43 ranches burned out, \$11,000 for ranch livestock killed in these forest fires, and \$24,000 for merchantable timber killed.

"The fire season of 1931 was a bad one—the worst, from the standpoint of damage which might have been done—since the historic season of 1910 when

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Montana suffered heavy losses by destructive forest fires this year, several of which were man-made. The forestry service is making preparation at this time to be adequately prepared to combat fires in the Treasure state and Idaho next season more efficiently.

74 people lost their lives in one fire," says Regional Forester van Kelley, in commenting on the report.

"That the loss of life on the wide-flung fire lines did not exceed eleven; that not a single rancher, camper, fisherman, or tourist perished is a miracle," he continued.

The two human figures which were the most disturbing, according to the regional forester, were the large increase in fires caused by carelessness of tourists and campers through smoking and camp fires, and a similar increase in the number of forest fires deliberately set.

"The people of Montana," said Kelley, in commenting on this phase of the fire situation, "must realize their own individual responsibility in the matter of fire in their forests.

"For these forests are theirs," he continued, "and until every tourist, fisherman and camper learns the danger of carelessness with fire and realizes that he, individually, must be careful and must see to it that others are careful, holocausts are inevitable."