

Fuel for Fire Poses Serious Threat

Features

Sports

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Thirty years ago this summer, a 407 square mile area in northwestern Oregon was charred by an inferno unequalled in recorded history of the northwest.

Ten days after the Hoffman Mountain lookout station reported a fire on Gales Creek, the 40,000-acre Tillamook fire created its own windstorm, and within the next 20 hours, the blaze roared through more than 220,000 acres of timber.

Trees were uprooted with the fury of the wind currents. An intense suction immediately in front of the inferno drew large Douglas firs in orderly rows directly into the flames. Firefighters watched with horror, and ran for their lives.

Coastal cities were covered with ashes, charred twigs and needles. The debris fell on the decks of ships 500 miles at sea.

Dense Fog Off Pacific

Then a dense fog blew in off the Pacific, slowing and finally halting the advancing flames.

When it was all over, all that remained was 261,222 acres of land charred and denuded of forest production. The Tillamook Burn went down on record as one of the worst forest fires in the nation's recorded history.

Six years later, another 200,000 acres in the same area burned; and again in six years—in 1945—fire blackened 182,000 acres.

Foresters started referring to the "six year jinx." In 1951, the Tillamook area was spared, but three other major blazes in the state burned over 55,000 acres of timber.

No Major Forest Fires

But in 1957, when the "jinx" was firmly established in the minds of timbermen, the state had no major forest fires. Now, six years later, foresters and tim-

bermen are wondering whether the "jinx" has really been broken.

They hope it is, for this year the condition in Oregon forests, including Jackson county, is described as potentially the most dangerous in recorded history of the state.

Added to the normal amount of fuel in the forests are trees blown down in the Columbus Day storm and the slash in areas where some of these trees have been salvaged.

Only about half of the blowdown in the Prospect and Union Creek ranger districts, hardest hit areas of southern Oregon in the Rogue River National forest, has been harvested. Most of it has been sold, but time may be edging toward next winter before some of it is removed.

Remains Tangled Mess

The unharvested blowdown remains a tangled mess of drying needles and limbs, accessible only by cutting through criss-crossed timber from the outer edge of the blowdown area.

In areas of harvested blowdown, debris created by salvaging merchantable logs is creating an added problem of excessive slash. The slash includes twisted and broken trees damaged beyond salvage.

Debris is windrowed in places, tractor-piled in some areas, and stacked by hand in other locations, depending on conditions. It will be there until after the first rains in the fall, posing a serious threat later in the summer.

Added to these conditions are two other factors which complicate the problem. These are the additional number of loggers in the woods harvesting merchantable blowdown, and a good growth of ground cover resulting from spring rains.

Form Dangerous Situation

Taken together, these factors form the most potentially dangerous situation observed in many generations.

So far this year, fortunately, there has been enough rain and cool weather to keep the situation from developing more rapidly, although even now the possibility of a forest fire is more prevalent than one may realize.

It will take only a few hot days for the fire danger to soar to extreme, and those few hot days may come anytime.

Special precautions are being taken in the event the forest fire danger soars rapidly, for too well do area foresters remember early September, 1955, and August, 1959.

The dates have nothing to do with any "jinx." They are dates area foresters remember, for it was on those dates that major fires raged in this area, including northern California, where more than 35,000 acres of Klamath National forest burned.

Fires Around Valley

It was on Labor Day, 1955, that fires started along the northern and western perimeters of the valley—the Sikes Creek fire in northern Jackson county, the Jackson Creek fire which edged close to the city of Jacksonville, the Blackwell Hill fire, and the small, but troublesome Nugget Butte fire near Gold Hill.

The first three mentioned burned over more than 9,000 acres of brush and timber.

At the same time in northern California, the Haystack fire raged out of control for more than a week.

Nor will many people forget the Ashland burn in August, 1959, which edged toward the Ashland watershed before it was contained. More than 4,000 acres were burned in the blaze.

There is probably nothing more dismal than the sight of burnt tree stumps standing naked against a scorched hillside. All signs of plant and animal life are gone. Nothing is left but ashes swirling around in the silent aftermath of a forest fire.

This is a scene foresters don't want repeated, this year or any other year.

It is a scene which this year could prevail when conditions worsen, and they will become worse as the summer progresses. It is a scene foresters hope everyone will help to prevent.

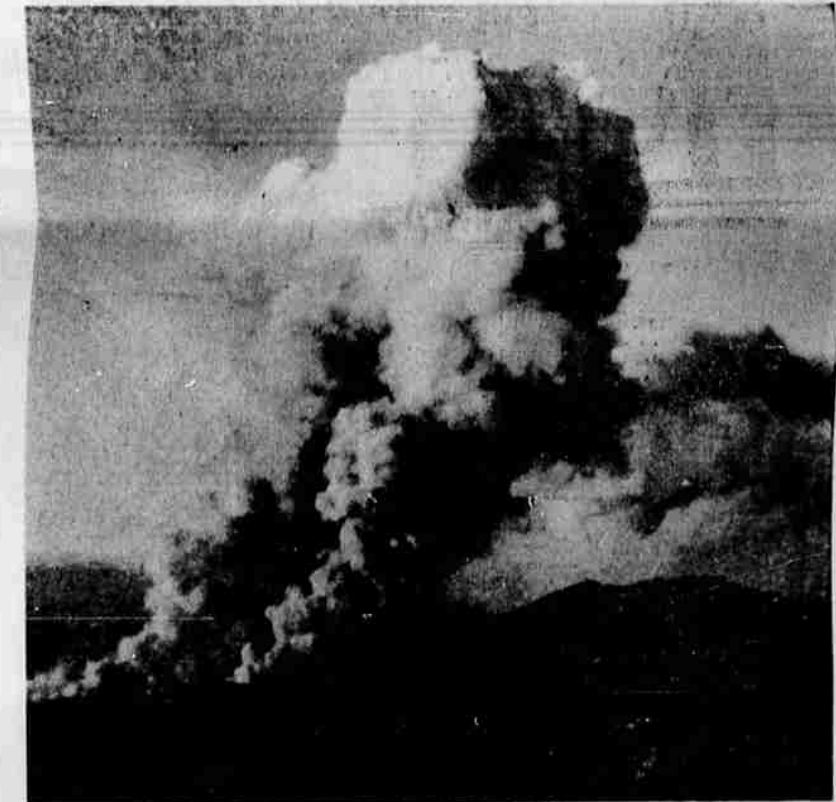
Slash from salvage operations in a blowdown area at Woodruff Meadows has been hand piled and covered with water-proof paper. The slash will be burned after the first good rain this fall, but because these piles are located in a camping area, they pose an added threat to an already complex forest fire fuel situation.



Blowdown in parts of the Rogue River National forest still lies on the ground from the Columbus Day storm, posing a serious fire hazard during the summer months. This blowdown in the Abbott Butte-Huckleberry Gap area in northern Jackson county is typical of a blowdown area.



A wet spring has resulted in a good ground cover of grass, illustrated by this picture taken at Woodruff Meadows last week. When such grass in higher elevations dries out, it will create an additional fire hazard in the forest. Such grass already has dried out in lower elevations in this area.



This is the situation which area foresters hope won't be repeated this year, when many sections of forest have an added load of fuel because of the Columbus Day storm. This is the column of smoke resulting from the Ashland burn in August, 1959.



Debris left after salvaging merchantable timber blown down in the Columbus Day storm is shown in this picture taken along the road to Woodruff Meadows in the Prospect ranger district. This debris will be tractor piled for burning this fall after the rain starts, but will add to the potential danger of forest fires during the summer.



A charred tree stands as mute evidence among smoldering debris in the Blackwell Hill fire of September, 1955, a scene area foresters don't want to see repeated. (Brainerd photo)



Forestry crews are shown in this picture trying to rehabilitate the Tillamook Burn, scene of one of the nation's most disastrous forest fires. (UPI)