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WOODS BURNING IN THE SOUTH

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Prepared by the FOREST SERVICE

The South needs productive forest and range lands to maintain its prosperity but it can not have them while woods-burning continues.

Yearly burnings in the South cover about 20,000,000 acres of forest and cut-over land, or about four-fifths of the total forest area burned in the United States. This represents a loss running into many millions of dollars.

The woods burner, like the boll weevil, the malaria germ, and the cattle tick, drags down business and undermines the general welfare. Because of him only a small percentage of merchantable second-growth timber which could have replaced the virgin stand is now available on cut-over lands. Because of him land values have suffered, industries and population have moved out, and idle acres have multiplied. Because of him every year millions of young forest seedlings, which in a short time would have constituted a valuable asset to land-owners, have been licked up by the flames.

The South, unlike the West where serious fire losses are caused by lightning, has the power to eliminate its forest fires; for they are man-caused and can be prevented by curbing the careless fire user and dealing firmly with the malicious fire setter. Sound economic policy demands that this power be exerted and that the brand of the woods burner be extinguished. The South can not afford to let the woods burner block economic progress.

Fire Causes

Most of the woods fires in the South are started by hunters, smokers, stockmen, and others upon lands which they do not own. To these fires are added the fires escaping from railroad engines, logging operations, field clearings, and "warming fires." There has thus grown up the belief in many quarters that woods burning is as inevitable as the seasons. Landowners feel that it is hopeless to try to keep fires from their land. So they become, in their helplessness, advocates of spring and fall burning. And one of the chief reasons they advance is that spring and fall burning is a means of defending their property against fires set by others. Yet often these protection burners make a bad situation worse by permitting their fires to spread beyond their own land.

Other reasons are advanced in support of the practice of woods burning, such as the desire to improve grazing for cattle or to destroy cattle ticks. It is not by fire, however, that the grazing can best be improved but by proper regulation of the number and distribution of stock on an area. Furthermore, repeated fires run out valuable forage plants like switch cane, Lespedeza, and carpet grass. And as for eradicating the cattle tick, woods fires will not do the job; the only effective method known is systematic dipping.

The Menace of Woods Burning

Regardless of the motive that may prompt a man to set fire in the woods, he creates a danger in doing so. An individual has the right to burn his own land, provided he confines the fire to his property and otherwise conforms to the law; but he is grievously at fault, unfair to his neighbors, and unmindful of the welfare of his community, when he permits the fire set on his land to spread to the land of another. Forestry can not be safely practiced in the South until the man who burns the woods is held to strict accountability. The irresponsible burner must be banished from the woods, and the well-intentioned burner must squarely face the responsibility incurred when he starts fire on his own land.

The Forest Service, United States Department of Agriculture, recognizes that its responsibility in this matter extends to its own practices in the administration of national forests in the pine region of the South. It has written into its policies for the two national forests in Florida that burning of the woods will not be permitted in connection with any further turpentine contracts other than to clear off protective strips and to conduct scientific experiments on a limited scale. It proposes to launch a systematic fire-prevention campaign to eliminate the causes of fires; to strengthen its facilities for extinguishing fires that do occur; and to enforce strictly its fire-trespass laws and regulations.

To sum up, forest destruction in the South is due to the custom of woods burning and the handicap which this custom imposes on the people who want to put their forest lands to profitable use. The woods burner, who is gnawing at the vitals of southern prosperity, is permitted largely to evade responsibility for his acts. Custom, indifference, and lack of understanding often join with him to defeat the efforts of the individual landowner and the public to keep fires out.

The Remedy

The remedy is clear. Individual responsibility for woods burning must be established, and the individual must be led through education to realize the need for outlawing fire and for taking his part in keeping fire out of the woods. Those not amenable to reason must be controlled by the vigorous enforcement of law, in order that the interests of the public and the landowners may be protected. Organized systems of fire prevention by States and landowners must be extended and strengthened.

No one agency alone can cope with this situation. All private landowners, all the Southern States, and the Federal Government must agree on a common course of action and work together to put an end to forest destruction.

The following program is offered as suggestive of the course to be followed:

Fire Prevention

Fire prevention comes first. It must strike through education at the lack of information, the prejudice, and the carelessness of the woods burner.

Every risk should be given close study, and direct and specific action should be taken for its control, reduction, and eventual elimination. Every agency of forest protection, public or private, through persistent personal contact should bring home to the town resident and the landowner a realization of the value of forests and range kept free from fire and of the loss to the individual and community that results from fire. There should be developed in each community and throughout the South a public sentiment against woods burning and a determination to do away with it.

Every educational facility available should be brought into play. The motion picture and illustrated lecture should be used to bring to every southern schoolhouse and meeting house a forest-protection message for old and young. The press, the billboard, the poster, the community fairs and expositions should all play their part.

Fire danger should be reduced by clearing rights of way, making sawmills safer, and adequately safeguarding brush fires.

Those who can not be persuaded by education must be reached by other methods. Laws honestly, fearlessly, and fairly enforced must be called to the public aid.

Preparedness

Systematic preparation to cope with woods fires begins where prevention stops. Even with the woods burner restrained, and carelessness hedged about with every possible precaution, we shall still—while men are human—have some fires in our southern woods. We must, therefore, have for every protective unit:

A system of detection which will accurately locate every fire that occurs, within the fewest possible minutes after the first appearance of smoke.

A means of communication by which the message that fire has broken out at a given place may be brought quickly to the nearest warden, ranger, or other person whose duty it is to attend to it.

Tools, supplies, and equipment of the right kinds, in adequate quantities, kept in the right places.

Organized man power and means of transportation which will insure that the fire reported can be hit quickly and hard before it gains headway.

Fire Suppression

The last resort in fire-protection effort is actual fire suppression. Its aim is to extinguish the fire completely with the least possible damage in the shortest time. This requires energy, thoroughness, and organizing ability on the part of leaders in fire control. Providing effective fire suppression is a task which requires the best thought and cooperative effort of both the public and the landowners.

By working unitedly on such a cooperative program of fire protection for the South, including prevention, preparedness, and suppression, public and private agencies and landowners, backed by the popular will, can make and keep the forests and ranges of the South productive.