

Fire - Selway

Oct. 23, 1919

REPORT

E. Koch

Fires on the Lochsa River.

Practically the entire lower Lochsa River drainage, comprising the main body of merchantable timber on the Selway burned this year. This catastrophe resulted from six large fires, the first two of which started from the lightning storm of July 11, and which burned all summer.

The fire statistics for the season for the Lochsa drainage are not at hand, but it would be illuminating to compile figures showing the percentage of fires on this area which got beyond control to those which were put out by the smokechasers. From partial information and general impressions I am of the opinion that the percentage of fires which got away is abnormally large as compared with the rest of the district. The initial action on all of these fires should be given very careful scrutiny. It is possible that adverse natural factors, excessive drought, high winds, and smoky condition of the atmosphere resulted in conditions that were beyond human power, with the resources available, to overcome. Before accepting this as the case the forest organization should get the answer to the following questions. Were all of the fires discovered promptly, located accurately, and reported at once? The fact that the Fish Butte Lookout was not connected by telephone may have delayed the report and location of some of these fires. Were the six trail men at Louse Lake called out as soon as they might have been? I have the impression that they were not called for several days after the first group of fires started. There were about 18 smokechasers and improvement men available for the group of nine fires which the storm of July 11 started. Were these men all used to the best advantage to get all of these fires in their early stages?

After the six large fires on the Lochsa drainage got beyond control they burned without interruption all summer, none of them being put under control or even partially held, with the possible exception of the Cedar

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fire. It seems to be an indisputable fact that practically all of the work expended on the Pete King, Bear Meadows, Fire Creek, Fish Creek, and Lochsa River fires was lost and that the final area burned was not decreased to any appreciable extent by the fire fighting efforts. In fact this is true of nearly all the fires on the Selway Forest which got beyond control of the smokechasers. Comparatively few such fires were controlled until the fall rains came.

The reasons back of the lack of success in controlling the large fires are various.

1. Unreliability of labor. More organized labor trouble occurred on the Selway than on any other forest in the District. A succession of strikes occurred at critical points. The first case was on the Running Creek fire, when Girard's entire crew walked out leaving the fire to burn. The next strike was on July 18 when a crew going in to the Bear Meadows fire went out. This crew successfully diverted 12 additional men who had just arrived in Kooskia from Spokane. Subsequently, there were two general strikes on the Pete King fire and one on the Cedars fire, all at critical moments.

The Selway Forest has the reputation ~~for~~ having an excessive amount of labor trouble, and the question had arisen as to whether men were getting sufficiently liberal treatment. After spending three weeks or more on the fire line and at No. 1 Ranger Station, I am satisfied that the men had no just cause for complaint in any case. The camps were all well supplied with grub and blankets, and the men were given what was coming to them under the terms of their contracts. They were not, however, given more. There was absolutely no time-sweetening or allowance of excessive hours. The trouble undoubtedly originated from the fact that the Selway played the game consistently from the start, and many other forests, particularly in the earlier part of the season, did not. Joe Boissanewu, one of the leaders of the men involved in the first strike, said, "We have been fighting fire on the other forests. We go out on patrol at night, sometimes some of us sleep while the others watch the fire. We get time till we get back to camp, sometimes fourteen, sixteen, twenty hours. If we can't get more than 12 hours' time we won't fight fire for 35¢ an hour. We can make better pay in the harvest fields." This crew struck because their demand for 14 hours pay for 12 hours work was refused. I have a suspicion that some of the strikes were pre-arranged before

the men left Spokane, that the I.W.W. organization had it in for the Selway and conducted a deliberate campaign for hampering their work.

Another factor which may have been back of some of the labor trouble is the remoteness of the region. The men dislike the long walks, and in the heavily timbered country, remote from roads, with fires burning in all directions, and the smoke so thick they could not see the tree tops, they were afraid and came out on various excuses.

2. Inability to secure sufficient men. There were several critical periods when if more men had been available, even the 50% efficient Spokane crews, some effective work might have been done. At just those periods the demand was great from other more accessible forests, and the Selway orders were quite properly cut to make it possible to fill the other orders for men. This process was perhaps carried a little too far, as the Nezperce got more than double the men the Selway did. Also it was rather discouraging to order more men from Spokane when men were walking out as fast as they could be shipped in. Such few local men as could be secured from Kooskia and Lewiston stayed on the job well and did good work.

3. Lack of transportation facilities. Undoubtedly lack of roads and trails was the greatest obstacle which had to be overcome in fighting the fires. I have little doubt that if there had been a good trail up the Lochsa River the Bear Meadows and Fire Creek fires could have been controlled. The lack of trails not only slowed down time getting to fires, but the fact that most of the trails available followed the ridges rather than the stream, made it necessary to attack the fires on the wrong side. The Bear Meadows and Fire Creek fires should have been struck from the river. As it was it was necessary to approach these fires from above, which resulted in putting the camps in dangerous places above the fires where they had to be moved out again with much loss of valuable time, and also in the loss of fire line by fires spreading out at the base and flanking the lines. The same thing was true of the Pete King fire. If there had been a trail up Pete King Creek so the camp could have been placed on the creek below the fire, it probably would have been controlled.

4. Other factors. The efficiency of the actual work on the fire lines should be analyzed closely. The Fish Creek fire, with Eleco in charge was apparently well handled. The crew had constructed a lot of fire line, and lost the day only by a very narrow margin. The Cedars fire evidently suffered from the lack of an experienced man in charge. Smith, the smokechaser, who had charge until replaced by Supervisor Conner from the Harney Forest, meant well and worked hard, but was lacking in woods experience and judgment. The fire was discovered on August 4. It took Smith four days to locate it, although it was only two miles from the trail, and by that time covered 300 acres. On August 9, 17 men arrived at the Rye Patch cabin 5 miles from the fire. It took from August 9 to 14, inclusive, to cut two miles of trail to the fire. The first work was done on the fire on August 15, or 11 days after it was reported. The trail was very badly located, crossing two ridges and two gulches, when a direct route from the fire up a ridge to the Pete King trail would have been possible.

Lookouts.

Only three lookouts on the Forest were visited, Indian Post Office, Castle Butte, and Coolwater. The Indian Post Office lookout on July 11 was in no condition for efficient work. The lookout man, Kramer, had arrived the previous day, and was given his instructions by Ranger Egan. A log cabin on the lookout has been started but not completed. As it is well located plans should be made for its completion. The lookout map was mounted on cloth, the edges of which had not been trimmed, and fluttered loose in the wind with a very unworkmanlike appearance. If a cloth-mounted map, not glued or shellacked to the board is used, it should be firmly fastened to the board by thumb tacks not over 3 inches apart. No thumb tacks were furnished for this map and it was held down to the board by three or four rocks. The board was mounted on a very loose and unsteady tripod. The azimuth circle pasted on the map was centered at a point on the ridge 1/2 mile south of the actual location of the lookout. The exact location of the lookout point should be determined by a line run from the Indian Post Office U.S.G.S. bench mark. The lookout had a heliograph, but as there was no instrument at Castle Butte where he was supposed to report, it was of no use. He had never learned the use of the instrument and could not operate it if there had been one at Castle Butte.

The quarters of the lookout and smokechaser were in a 7X9 tent, 50 yards from the summit. If possible, a larger tent should be furnished for permanent camps, or a fly for cooking and eating quarters.

The Castle Butte Lookout was efficiently equipped to serve its purpose, and the lookout man understood his business. The map might be improved on, at least in appearance. It was mounted on cloth with the edges untrimmed and attached to the board with cleats tacked round the edge. It is suggested that all lookout maps be attached to the board with shellac, following directions for mounting in the Lookout Chapter of the Western Forestry and Conservation Association Manual, and that all lookout maps have the azimuth circle drawn in waterproof ink rather than use the paper circles.

The tent camp at Castle Butte was a poor showing for a permanent camp. There was no table or other conveniences, no bunks for visiting officers, and the stove was badly burned out. This seems to be a general failing on the forest. There is not sufficient effort made to make the men comfortable, which does n't cost much and adds a good deal to their contentedness. If they don't do things for themselves they should be instructed to do them.

The Coolwater Lookout is equipped with an observatory building which is in general satisfactory. The lookout board is mounted on a tripod outside the cabin. As only a part of the field can be seen from this point it is suggested that a platform be constructed on top of the building where the board can be mounted. It was noted that the lookout map in use had the azimuth circle placed nearly a degree off true north and south, which could cause a corresponding error in all readings. The stone steps to the building are in bad repair and dangerous. The lookout man has plenty of time to construct a substantial stone terrace in front of the door, which would add to the comfort and appearance of the building.

Pasture for Government Stock.

It is understood from information by Supervisor Howell that there is a considerable area of grazing land along the Middle Fork just outside the Forest, which is still public domain. If there is a chance to get a good pasture here which could be used to winter the Government stock, or at least for fall and spring pasture, the status of the land should be investigated and a request made for withdrawal from entry.

Trail Signs.

The Selway Forest has unbelievably few signs on its trails. Even at the most important trail junctions the traveler has his choice of two trails with nothing to guide him except his map. This lack was emphasized in Mr. Delevan's memorandum of last year, but apparently there has been no improvement. The Forest needs literally hundreds of trail signs. The painting of these signs should be given all the time possible during the coming winter, and an equally determined effort should be made to get the signs in place before the fire season next spring. Some signs were seen stacked up at the Middle Fork Station which were painted last winter but not put in place.