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LIGHTNING AND FOREST FIRES

According to the U. S. Forest Service, the successful control of lightning fires is one of the most difficult problems confronting American forest owners. During the year 1926 lightning caused 31 per cent. of all the fires occurring in the forest areas of the United States in which fire protection prevails. The records for the northern Rocky region are even more striking. In Idaho and Montana during the same year lightning caused 59 per cent. of all the forest fires and did 72 per cent. of the total damage.

Since 1920 the Forest Service has been collecting detailed reports on lightning storms and lightning fires from the lookouts stationed at lofty points in the forest regions, especially in California and the northern Rockies. During the five fire seasons from 1922 to 1927 about 5,000 reports were assembled and analyzed.

The most important fact thus far brought out by the investigation is that the mere appearance of a lightning storm, if reported immediately, serves as a very useful warning of impending danger. There is usually an interval of many hours between the arrival of the storm and the first fire reported from the lookout station, and some fires do not show up until a day or two after the storm is sighted. Thus there is generally a good deal of time to mobilize the fire-fighting forces and get them to the right spot if storms are promptly reported. On the basis of these warnings and the 36-hour forecasts of the Weather Bureau men can be removed from other work and held in readiness to reach and suppress fires with the least possible delay.

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