A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed September 13, 1928

By Charles Fitzhugh Talman,
Authority on Meteorology

LIGHTNING AND FOREST FIRES

There are parts of North America, particularly in the western United States, where more than half of all the forest fires are started by lightning. In California, where accurate figures for a recent decade are available, 4,362 out of a total of 10,499 forest fires were due to this cause. There were some parts of the same state where the percentage was much higher.

The worst feature of lightning fires in the forests is that they are generally massed in large numbers during relatively brief periods of time; i.e., during the occurrence of individual storms. Thus they are likely to overtax the powers of the fire-fighting organization and get beyond control. Of the total area burned over by lightning fires in California during the ten-year period above mentioned, 66 per cent, was due to three storms. Another bad feature of such fires, as compared with those started by human agencies, is that a large proportion of them occur in places difficult of access.

In most parts of the world thunderstorms are generally accompanied by rain heavy enough to extinguish the fires started by lightning, but in California and adjacent states "dry" thunderstorms are frequent.

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SCIENCE SERVICE,
21st and B Sts.,
Washington, D.C.