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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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FIRE WEATHER IN THE EAST

The disastrous epidemic of fires in woods, fields and towns that broke loose a few days ago in the eastern United States furnishes a striking proof of the fact that the hazard of "fire weather" is not peculiar to the forests of western North America, where so much has been heard about it in recent years. In the Pacific coast region, with its dry summers, the fire season extends from late spring to the middle of autumn, but in the east fires are more prevalent in spring and fall. A few days of warm, dry weather in the spring before vegetation is well advanced, by drying the ~~dead~~ leaves of the previous autumn gives favorable conditions for fire. Such conditions preceded the recent conflagrations. Droughty weather had prevailed for some weeks; the temperature had mounted above the average for the season; and, above all, strong, dry westerly winds preceded and accompanied the outbreak.

It would be a mistake to say that the fires were favored merely by a combination of drought and wind. The most important element of "fire weather" is now recognized to be the humidity of the atmosphere. A prevalence of winds from the ocean, rather than from the interior of the continent, would have kept the atmosphere moist and the moisture in the air would, in turn, have moistened the forest litter, dead grass, etc., so that, despite the previous lack of rain, there would have been little danger of fire. The winds undoubtedly helped to spread the flames, but they were, as contributors to the disaster, equally effective in drying out the combustible materials.

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