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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed July 20, 1931

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LIGHTNING AND FOREST FIRES

For some years the U. S. Forest Service has been making a thorough study of lightning storms in the national forests of the northern Rocky Mountain region, where lightning causes more fires, more damage and more expense for suppression than do all other agencies combined. During one day -- July 12, 1926 -- more than 150 fires were started by lightning in the Kaniksu forest alone; the area of this forest being 600,000 acres.

According to H. T. Gisborne, of the Forest Service, an analysis of 14,754 reports from fire lookouts stationed on mountain tops during the 5-year period 1924-1928, inclusive, shows that about 34 lightning storms out of 100 caused fires. The degree of fire hazard depends upon the duration of the rainfall ahead of and following the lightning, the electrical activity of the storm, and the percentage of flashes confined to the clouds or passing between clouds and earth. One interesting result of this study is that "dry" thunderstorms (in which no rain reaches the ground) are much less prolific, relatively, of fires than has heretofore been assumed. Less than one-tenth of all the storms were dry, and about one-third of these started fires, whereas about one-third of the wet storms also started fires. Mr. Gisborne finds an explanation for this apparent anomaly in the fact that in dry storms the flashes are generally few and mostly confined to the clouds.

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