

A Science Service Feature

Released upon receipt
but intended for use
February 13, 1932

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

Mailed February 6, 1932

By Charles Fitzhugh Talman,
Authority on Meteorology.

FIRE WEATHER

Until about two decades ago the important part played by weather in relation to forest fires was only vaguely recognized by foresters and meteorologists. Today the observation and prediction of "fire weather" enter into the ordinary routine of forest protection in the United States and Canada, and a review of the fire season in a forested area includes, as a matter of course, an account of the season's weather. Thus the annual report of the Washington Forest Fire Association for 1931, just published, tells of a protracted period of low relative humidity -- i.e., dry air -- in April, 1931, and its disastrous effects. We read:

"The period April 19th to April 28th was one of extreme fire risk. At this period of the year, the dead vegetation of the previous summer's growth becomes light and tindery, and needs but a spark to start a fire which is beyond control almost from the first. As invariably happens, the low relative humidities were accompanied by high winds, naturally increasing the danger of rapid spread. The official closed season was not yet in force, and many ranchers had set out land clearing fires. While nearly every April shows a period of low humidity for a few days, yet past experience shows that such periods are relatively short, both as to hours per day and number of days. Meteorological records do not show any instance of continuous low humidity such as was experienced during the period of April 19th to 28th, 1931. Many ranchers' fires, therefore, escaped control, which under normal circumstances would have been safe. A great deal of damage to young growth and logged-off land occurred at this time. Fires were out of control once they got a start, and any slash area afire was an inferno. Spot fires were started over two miles from the main fire body. During this period of high hazard, when the field force was not yet on duty with its equipment, some \$11,876.00 out of a total for the season of \$44,852.00, or 26.5 per cent., was expended in fire suppression. The area burned over was 72,703 acres, or 49.7 per cent. of the total burned over for the season. Never in the history of the state has cause existed for such pre-season expenditures to control fires."

(All rights reserved by Science Service, Inc.)

SCIENCE SERVICE
21st and Constitution Ave.
Washington, D. C.