

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed April 25, 1933

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WEATHER AND FIRES

An episode illustrating the important part that weather often plays in connection with fires happened a few years ago at Berkeley, Calif. Under the influence of a strong dry wind a fire starting in dry grass about noon swept rapidly into a suburban brush field and forest, communicated itself to neighboring houses, and soon began to spread rapidly into the city. From 2 to 5 p.m. nothing could be done to check the progress of the flames. Meanwhile the pressure distribution controlling the winds was moving eastward. By half past five the dry easterly wind had been succeeded by a moisture-laden wind from the ocean and the fire was then easily brought under control.

A somewhat similar case occurred in northern Minnesota in October, 1918. Uncontrolled fires were burning in many places, but they were regarded merely as unimportant "brush fires." Presently a big storm passed over the region, bringing low humidity, rapid evaporation and strong winds. The slow-running and smouldering fires were whipped together into a few rapidly spreading fires along a wide front and a great disaster followed. Towns were wiped out almost as soon as the fires reached them and whole forests were destroyed. Cloquet, Brookston and Moose Lake were laid in ashes. More than 450 people perished. Then, as suddenly as the fires had flared up, under the influence of a new weather situation and a shift of wind they quieted down and were quickly extinguished.

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