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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed July 31, 1933

A RAIN-MAKING PROJECT

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Wild schemes for regulating weather and climate crop up every day or so, and it is one of the steady jobs of the professional meteorologist to throw cold water on them. Strange to say, one of the most chimerical of these schemes was proposed by a meteorologist -- James P. Espy, the famous author of "The Philosophy of Storms" -- who flourished, however, when meteorology was an infant science.

It is a now well-known fact that, when atmospheric conditions are particularly favorable, enough moisture may be condensed in the updraft of air over a big fire to produce a local shower. Espy was familiar with this rain-making process but greatly overestimated its efficacy. Hence in 1845 he put forth the following proposal:

"Let masses of timber to the amount of forty acres for every twenty miles be prepared and fired simultaneously every seven days in the summer on the west of the United States, in a line of six or seven hundred miles long from north to south. Then the following results seem highly probable, but not certain until the experiment is made: A rain of great length north and south will commence near or on the line of fires; this rain will travel eastward; it will not break up till it reaches far into the Atlantic Ocean; it will rain over the whole country east of the place of beginning."

Espy supposed that the rains, once started, would be carried eastward by the prevailing westerly winds, and he saw in his utopian project a means of relieving farmers of both droughts and excesses of rainfall. He seems to have overlooked the fact that great forest fires often rage for weeks in the western states without appreciably affecting the rainfall to the eastward!

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