SOUTH-CENTRAL OREGON

Fire-Season Indexes and Weather

A very cold and wet May, a cool summer with a little rain in August, and an unusually wet October kept the fire season to near-normal severity in comparison with past years. Burning index was lower than in the preceding two seasons, while average number of days since wetting rain was slightly above normal, and total rainless days was ordinary (table 1).

Spring. -- Normal spring fire danger resulted from normal spacing of wetting rains, burning index below that of the previous two springs, and slightly more than the normal number of rainless days. April was warm and dry, but was counteracted by an extremely cold and wet May. June rain was negligible and temperature was normal.

Summer. -- Though temperatures were below normal in July and August, summer burning index was normal. Early August rains, mostly in the northern portion, brought about twice the normal monthly rainfall; however, average time since a wetting rain was well above normal, and total rainless days slightly higher than normal. General severity was normal. Lightning storm occurrence was normal. The Fremont, with 15, had the most lightning storm days.

Fall. -- Following sporadic light rains in late September, unusual, almost daily wetting rains October 7 through 14 brought the fire season to an abrupt close. October rainfall was more than twice normal over most of the area. All three indexes were below average severity despite a return to dry weather the last 2 weeks of October. This fall was among those with the lowest fire danger in south-central Oregon forests.

Fire Occurrence

With fire-season weather indexes near normal, total fire occurrence figures for all ownerships were lower than in the previous two seasons, though on State and private lands there were a few more fires, both lightning and man-caused, than in 1960. The 174 man-caused fires (121 on National Forests and 53 on State and private lands) compares with 224 in 1961. Lightning produced 155 fires compared with 440 in 1961. Acreage burned on both ownerships was below that of the preceding 2 years; the 1,385 burned acres compares with 2,967 acres burned in 1961.

COLUMBUS DAY STORM

Although it was accompanied by very low burning index in most areas, the Columbus Day storm was the 1962 weather event with the greatest impact on fire control agencies. This storm was the most severe, in terms of widespread damage, to hit the Region in historical times, and few, if any, storms have exceeded its fury even in smaller areas. Forest fuel types over much of the Douglas-fir region in Oregon and Washington were converted in a few hours from low to moderately hazardous second-growth and old-growth stands to jumbled masses of smashed trunks and tops that, with the 1963 dry season, will become a mammoth collection of red Douglas-fir slash. This was the result of an unusually intense extra-tropical cyclone (the usual Temperate Zone storm) which moved north along the coast bringing hurricane-force winds (75 m.p.h.) to most of the Douglas-fir region. Winds exceeding 100 miles per hour, at least in gusts, were undoubtedly experienced in most exposed portions of western Oregon and western Washington. The Coast Ranges received the brunt of the storm, though there was severe damage in the Willamette Valley and north into the Puget Sound area. The Cascade foothills sustained extensive blowdown, but the winds eased off before reaching the Cascade Crest. Scattered blowdown also occurred over an extensive area east of the Cascades.

Although peak gusts probably were not observed at most reporting stations due to power outages or absence of wind-recording instruments, the following reported maxima are generally indicative: Mount Hebo (USAF), 170 m.p.h. (estimated); Morrison Bridge (Portland), 116 m.p.h.; Troutdale (FAA), 106 m.p.h.; Naselle, Wash. (USAF), 160 m.p.h.; Renton (FAA), 100 m.p.h.