

HANDLING THE FIRE PERIL

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IN 1910, probably the worst fire year in American history—a year when no rain fell for months, when the winds were veritable hurricanes, when fires sprang up everywhere and were numbered not by hundreds but by thousands—the Western Forestry and Conservation Association and its constituent membership carried safely through the season fully 16,000,000 acres of forest, containing at least the stupendous amount of 300,000,000,000 feet of timber. They spent \$700,000 for patrol and fire fighting and extinguished over 5,580 fires. Of the vast area protected, barely half a million acres were burned over, including timber, second-growth and cut-over land. Not more than half of one per cent of all the private timber in Idaho, Washington and Oregon, the states which suffered heaviest from the 1910 fires, was damaged, and the actual loss will not exceed a quarter of one per cent.

True, this loss was serious, and there was destruction of villages and human lives, but this was only the greater evidence of the test to which the associations were subjected. It proves only too well the hazard which applied equally to the immense area saved and compared to which the loss was insignificant. Had it not been for the associations, the West would have suffered one of the greatest calamities the world has seen.

During the legislative season following, the Association made an active campaign for more adequate state protective work, especially in Oregon and Washington, and due chiefly to its efforts these states passed completely new forest codes and increased their annual appropriation from \$23,000 to \$68,000.

The Association receives continual requests for information about organization and methods of cooperative work from all parts of the United States and Canada, and many new associations have resulted. It is mentioned more frequently in press and periodicals than any forest protective agency in the United States except the federal forest service.

All this means a record of achievement. It means that the timber owners of the Pacific Northwest are held up as protectors of the nation's resources instead of destroyers, as worthy of public commendation rather than suspicion. It means conceding an honestly earned right to a voice in laws and policy of conservation. It means that the stability of investments in western timber is being impressed on capital. Consequently it must mean sound principles, effective methods, and expenditures both liberal and well directed. What are, then, the objects and methods of the cooperative work which has given the Pacific Northwest this distinction?

The first principle of the movement is to preserve the forests. Not to tell some one else how, but to do it. There is a difference. Propaganda associations, like newspaper articles and speeches, are good in their way, but it takes real money and work to put out fires. The Pacific coast associations get the money and spend it. If two cents an acre suffices, well and good; if it takes

fifteen cents, why fifteen is spent. Probably this is the single greatest difference from the popular two-or-three-dollar-annual-due association and from the watch-dogged congressional system of guarding the public domain.

The second cardinal principle is community of interest. The associations do only those things by which the private forest owner, the people, the state and the government unquestionably benefit equally. Consequently they have no criticism or suspicion to fear and, what is far more important, are always in position to enlist support or join forces anywhere without embarrassing themselves or any one else. During all the recent controversies between factions regarding federal conservation policies, states rights and the like, the association meetings and affairs have been participated in with the utmost harmony and on equal footing by lumbermen, state officials, forest service officers and conservation enthusiasts. Whatever each may think of existing conditions or proposed changes in them, his work with the association is to make the very best of them as they are, with his own hands or money, for the common public good. Without denying that the question of for whom our resources are to be conserved is important, the association concerns itself not at all with this question, but proceeds to conserve, actually and practically, dealing with the resources themselves instead of views concerning them, to the end that they may not be destroyed before disputants agree as to who shall eventually enjoy them.

Related closely to community interest is the cooperative principle which has been applied, not only in theory, but to its utmost lengths in finance, counsel and objects. In the actual fighting of fires and publication of educational material, as well as in interchange of experience and suggestions, the forest owners work with each other, with the public and with state and government. Every effort is made to perfect a system under which all agencies for forest preservation may work not only without friction and with the strength of numbers, but with the least unnecessary expense of duplicated effort. Cooperation is a word often employed but seldom really applied. With us it means more than mere voluntary give or take, where each secures the other's help with the least return and both are mutually suspicious and guarded. We pool the work so each *has* to contribute his very best effort, or suffer himself in consequence.

Finally, publicity has been sought and welcomed, and in two ways. There has been an unremitting educational campaign to convert public and lumberman alike to necessity and methods of forest preservation. Furthermore, the actual work of the associations has been laid bare for scrutiny in every detail. Meetings and reports are public. There can be no charge that the influence of the organization is used for any hidden or improper purpose.

So much for general principles, now as to definite objects. It is the belief of the several forest owners' associations of the Pacific Northwest, affiliated in the Western Forestry and Conservation Association, that, while conservative management in all ways should be adopted as fast as conditions permit, the underlying foundation is safety from fire. They believe that to secure it there must be extensive education, strict enforcement of good fire laws, vigilant trained patrol to suppress before they spread the fires which start in spite of all preventive effort, and means of marshaling quickly an efficient force to fight the very few large fires which will occur, notwithstanding the foregoing precautions, just as a Baltimore or San Francisco burns.

They attempt to provide as much of such a system as private effort can provide, and to secure provision of the rest by the public. They believe that division of responsibility should be something like this: The forest owner should do his full share financially and is best equipped through local and

practical knowledge to patrol and fight fire. The state should assist him, for life, property and forests are community resources, and it is in the strongest position to do educational and law-enforcing work. But since to bring about such an ideal division in itself requires much education, the associations now have to assume much of this burden also.

These policies, and the methods by which they are put into practical application have developed from comparatively small beginnings. The first step was installation of patrol systems by individual owners. This led to cooperative patrols to reduce the expense of duplication. This, again, quickly proved the far greater efficiency of systematic organization, wholly aside from the question of cost, and also greater influence over careless public and lumbermen. Varying in extent of territory from a single watershed, as in Idaho, to half a state, as in Washington, patrols were consolidated into formal associations which assess each member at an equal acreage rate and transact the entire business of employing, supervising and supplying the fire forces, having them authorized by the state, building trails and telephone lines, etc. The cost is modified to suit the season by adding or laying off men, and danger points are given special attention, much better than through individual effort. Especially advantageous is the covering of gaps between holdings.

Cooperation with state and government forces is placed on a systematic basis. The territory of each association is divided into districts, each having its local patrol, and these are grouped by districts under inspectors. A chief fire warden controls the whole system. Every officer, in addition to straight patrol and fire work, is held responsible for keeping settlers, campers and loggers advised of the fire laws, dealing with violators, looking after dangerous slashings, etc. They are as severe upon lumbermen as upon any one else and pay no attention to ownership. The same work is done upon land belonging to non-members as upon that of members. This principle of equal treatment is a cardinal one throughout. The member owning but 40 acres has the same vote in the affairs of the association as the member with 100,000 acres.

The cost of this protection varies from 1½ cents an acre annually to as high as 15 cents expended last year by some of the hardest-hit Idaho associations. In Idaho, the state is a member of the associations, paying its pro rata on its timbered grant lands. In Washington it helps defray the expenses under agreement by the state forester.

One of the early lessons learned was that results in forest protection are most truly measured not by the fires put out, but by the absence of fires to extinguish. Patrolmen are selected largely for their ability to command public respect and enlist public interest in the first problem. Similarly each association gives its work and results the greatest possible publicity, which is an easy matter, for press and public accept the work as for community good and the information obtained as reliable.

It soon became apparent that the same advantage secured by local cooperation would apply to the working together in other than local matters by the several associations. Consequently the Western Forestry and Conservation Association was formed to afford central facilities for all forest protective agencies in the five states of Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon and California. It is a sort of grand lodge, without individual membership except that the chief state and federal forest officers are prominent and valued members. All associations devoted to forest conservation are eligible, including the public conservation associations having no connection with the timber industry, and have equal vote.

A forester is employed, with facilities for investigative and educational work. One of the chief duties of his office is to act as a clearing house for all

the affiliated organizations, not only for exchanging experience and suggestions, but also for issuing publicity matter, dealing with outside agencies and generally representing the movement in all ways. Being recognized as a disinterested authority, the central association is invited into council on subjects of forest protection and legislation all over the United States, by public, private and official agencies of all kinds. It furnishes material for the reports of state conservation and forestry commissions, prepares and advises upon forest legislation, supplies copy for educational literature and fire warnings, assists public speakers in the preparation of papers dealing with forestry subjects, and is frequently called upon to address conventions of all kinds.

One particularly important function of the central association is to collect and distribute frequent and reliable information concerning fire conditions, steps to meet them evolved by the several agencies, and the results in protection and losses. It affords the only means of combining state, federal and private reports. Two meetings a year are held, at which representatives of each of these agencies from the five states confer and to which are invited any others who may be concerned. For example, last December's meeting was made the occasion to discuss cooperation with officials of the transcontinental railroads.

All of this costs money. To insure against any possible charge of selfish influence by those who supply it, no individual contributions or dues are permitted. Once a year the affiliated organizations vote a pro rata assessment to cover the following year's estimated expenses, and in its use the forester is governed only by a semi-annual meeting of five trustees, one from each state, elected at an annual meeting in which every local association has equal voice regardless of the amount of its contributory assessment.

The history and future of this movement are of much significance. The five states involved contain half the standing timber in the United States today. The protection of this national resource is of the highest importance. But quite as important is the fact that here, where such forests can be produced more rapidly than elsewhere, is the great field of future American forestry—the nation's woodlot, as it were. And so far from requiring compulsion in the public's behalf, the private owners who hold these great forest areas in trust are doing their part to safeguard the future consumer more liberally than state or Congress, and by doing so today give the best earnest of their part in the future.

