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# Newsletter

C A L F I R E M U S E U M

## EVOLUTION OF CALIFORNIA'S WILDLAND FIRE PROTECTION SYSTEM

By

C. Raymond Clar

The government of the State of California, through substantial appropriations of money and the delegation of authority to its Board of Forestry and State Forester, is heavily involved in what is termed basic forest fire protection. This writing will briefly develop the history leading to that involvement.

The State's concern is for the prevention and abatement of fires which threaten a loss to general watersheds or timber bearing land owned by the State or private parties, and not being within a corporate city. Thus we are technically not involved with some 45 percent of the State which is controlled by the various federal agencies, nor land within 395 corporate cities, nor the sparsely vegetated deserts. Nor is there embraced in the so-called State Responsibility Area the approximate 10 million acres of agricultural-suburban land which is not deemed to possess an inherent general watershed value. This latter type of land may be referred to as "rural" for the sake of convenience.

The State Responsibility Areas embrace some 37.5 million acres, somewhat more than one-third of the total land area. As a matter of comparison, this area, as zoned by the Board of Forestry in accordance with law, is larger in size than the State of Arkansas, much larger than Alabama and larger than a combination of Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont.

The zoned areas of State interest are composed of rolling hills or high and often precipitous mountains. From Oregon to Mexico these areas range through 700 latitudinal miles. In elevation they rise from the ocean to 8000 feet. On the same day some of this land may be bathed in ocean fog while desert winds are searing other areas dry as tinder.

The lands may bear a natural cover of coniferous timber, broadleaf woodland, dense chaparral, grassy woodland or desert sage. Such a diversity of geography, climate, and vegetation should reveal how difficult and how different are the skills and facilities required for the accomplishment of adequate wildland fire protection.

Throughout any year fires may be ignited and run freely through the countryside during a period varying from six months to an entire calendar year. The *period of exposure* of flammable vegetation to fire-causing agents, presents an aspect of financing and maintaining a fire department which should not be overlooked in any comparison of fire problems in different parts of the nation. Also there must be faced the difficulties encountered in developing both the physical organization and the budgeting procedures required to function under such variable and unpredictable periods of need. In passing, it may be noted that the geographic depth of a statewide fire organization is a vital asset in meeting widely scattered fire emergency problems.

Currently the State of California, through its Division of Forestry, expends annually some 25 million dollars on wildland fire protection over the designated area of interest. Details of the basic organization are rigidly budgeted and accounted for. However, unknown calamities must be met with contingency funds, and several days of racing wild-fire before high September winds can easily dissipate a million dollars from the fire emergency fund. This money is needed to hire additional men and equipment and for transportation and food.\*

### ***Who is Interested in What Flammable Values?***

The essential questions are these: Why has the State of California become so heavily involved in wildland fire protection? And how did it come to create an active State fire department along with the assumption of a great financial burden?

An approach to an adequate answer also demands a scrutiny of the following secondary yet fundamental questions. What kinds and where located is the property in need of protection from fire damage; who will pay the cost of any protection offered; what particular agent will

assume the active job of preventing and attacking unwanted fires?

The fact that many decades were required to permit all of the diverse elements to be settled into a practical working arrangement is evidence of the complexity of any comprehensive answer to the questions. And the workable solutions were, of course, continuously affected by the changing influences generated by the social, political and economic conditions of the times.

In order to simplify the complex situation, a scrutiny of two extremes and the midway area of what might be termed fire protection

value-classes will be undertaken. These classes can be termed the timber-watershed zone, the incorporated city, and the rural (or rural-agricultural) area. The fact that these value-classes may to some extent be overlapping, or that some citizens or government entities may have a direct interest in more than one of them can be disregarded in order to emphasize the salient differences.

It can be said that the entire broad community suffers a loss when any material value is destroyed. The fact is, however, that a timberland owner in Amador County would find it difficult to determine how much he had actually lost when a home was burned in Chicago or one in San Francisco. For practical purposes the answer is zero.

The home was owned as very personal property. In this case the primary loser and payer is the owner. Yet his neighbors had been sharing this calculated loss with him for a long time. They had all been paying for fire insurance and they had also been paying local taxes to support a city fire department. The agent responsible for doing the work of fire abatement is the city.

Consider now the case of a timber fire on the privately owned land in Amador County. Is the home owner in San Francisco involved, and the home owner in Chicago who never heard of Amador County? The answer is Yes; to a certain extent. The determination of that extent constitutes the essence of this writing.

Timber has been considered a natural economic and military resource of vital importance to the colonial and national economy since the first settlement of the continent by immigrant Europeans. The fact that at some places at some time the timber was regarded as a nuisance can be set aside as a transient attitude not actually affecting this basic premise: The availability of forest resources is of concern to the entire nation. Upon that premise the National Forests were created, and upon that premise the Federal Government has appropriated millions of dollars to assist in the protection of private timberland from fire, insect and plant pests.

The home owners in Chicago and San Francisco do have an interest in the Amador timber, and each helps pay for its protection. Because the State of California has a more localized interest, the man in San Francisco pays a little more for the job of fire protection. He pays that added share in State taxes.

And, further, because the water and snow that falls upon the Amador forests and the other uplands is actually of more material benefit to the resident of San Francisco and other lowland residents than to the landowner, and because it is of benefit to the general welfare of the Nation, both the man in San Francisco and the man in Chicago have some responsibility for the protection of general public watersheds.

It has been relatively easy to dispose of the question of who pays for the job of preventing and reducing fire loss of a private and personal property such as a house. (And, of course, the house of the resident in the high timber of Amador is as much a private property as are the houses in Chicago or San Francisco.) Timber, on the other hand, is a resource possessing a particular value for many persons and groups.

Continued from Page 4

These would include in addition to government, the actual owner, lumber workers, the local business community, and numerous types of recreation seekers. In brief, it can be declared that here exists an inextricable collection of interested persons and parties who, whether they are actually aware, have something to lose if the forest is destroyed, and who therefore should pay some share of the cost of its protection.

Since the elements of government have been created to represent various geographic units of citizen grouping, it is natural that the designation of responsibility levels in such an activity as fire protection has been dealt with in terms of government levels: Federal, State, County, City. And further, the creation of fire protection districts has been made possible by State law specifically to provide for the establishment of politico-geographic fire protection communities not adequately served by one of the named common echelons of government.

More specifically, the fire protection district and the county government, while both may be decidedly interested in the protection of timber-watershed land, do constitute the government entities most responsible for providing fire protection for the midway land between city and forested upland referred to here as rural land.

In the rural area the flammable values include such things as structures and equipment, fences, flat or hilly livestock range, orchards, and hay, and most vulnerable to fire—standing grain. And there would also be small towns with too little community wealth to acquire and maintain city firefighting equipment. The owners and residents pay their taxes and most of them are greatly concerned about protecting their property from fire.

The Federal Government cannot be shown to have a direct financial or administrative interest in this local problem. This would certainly be true as long as the problems and their cumulative effect upon the general welfare remain localized and their solution is undertaken by local government.

The important question is: To what extent, if any, should the State, through its Division of Forestry or otherwise, be involved either administratively or financially in this rural fire protection? For decades the Board of Forestry wrestled with this fulcrum point of policy determination. Their several conclusions of record indicate that they generally followed the most practical course, both fiscally and politically. Briefly stated, their solutions were not very precise.

The question of the degree and manner of involvement of State Government in the protection of the timber and upland watersheds was in itself a long enduring problem of policy determination. The need was, of course, long recognized from the broad public interest standpoint.

Two forces or elements of the basic problem countered each other as each became larger in scope with the passage of time. Time brought more population, greater values exposed to fire loss, more fires and more public demand for fire protection. This element of the situation was balanced against, in fact, it caused the progressive acceptance (however reluctant) by State and Federal Government of direct responsibility and action in this area of the public welfare.

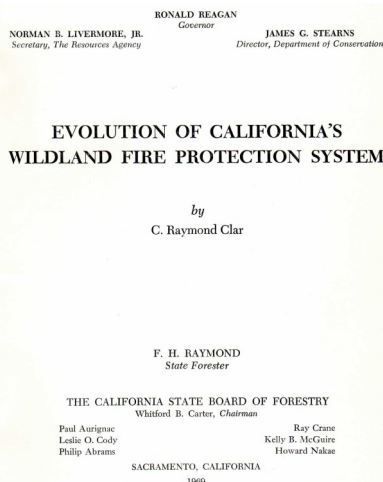
The sharp historical stepping-stones of wildland fire protection can be observed in the Weeks Law of 1911, the Clarke-McNary Act of 1924, and the tremendous public work programs of the Great Depression Decade, 1930-40.

Not every State has found it necessary to emulate California which has been spending millions of dollars annually to man and equip probably the world's largest unified wildland fire protection organization. However, some other States might well profit in understanding how and why this has occurred. Much of the answer lies in the physical behavior of wildfire.

If every fire that became ignited upon the wildland of California remained conveniently small and confined to its place of origin this article would not have been written. Nor would the great State fire protection organization have been established.

Forest fires are fiercely ambulatory and they respect no boundaries of land ownership. Left unchallenged their difficulty and cost of control and the resulting damage increase approximately in geometric proportion as their life is allowed to extend. This fact was observed early in California.

Because this public nuisance was so unpredictable in its potential for loss of life and property, and because it could so quickly develop and spread, responsible citizens and State officials early recognized the need of some consistent supervision at State level if nothing else. Then the Legislature from time to time, was persuaded to enact laws which provided that persons or other entities of government could organize and do things to accomplish rural and wildland fire protection.



These are taken from the pamphlet shown on the left side, the first 9 pages, the pamphlet has 35 pages. The remainder of the pages will be in two future newsletters.

Jerry Glover

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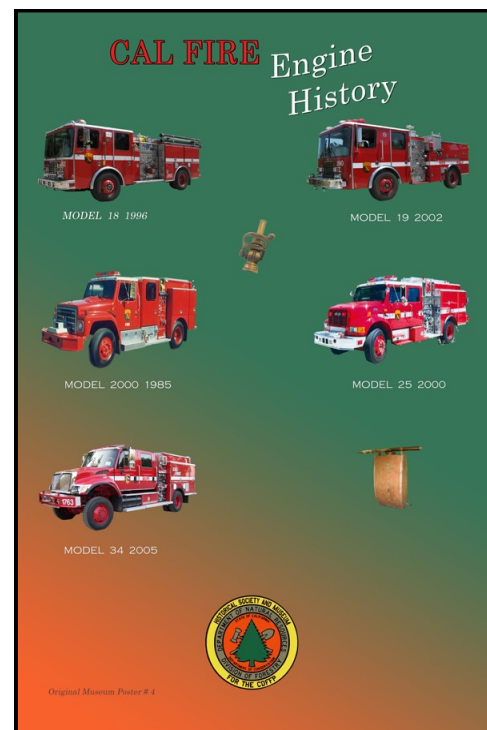
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