

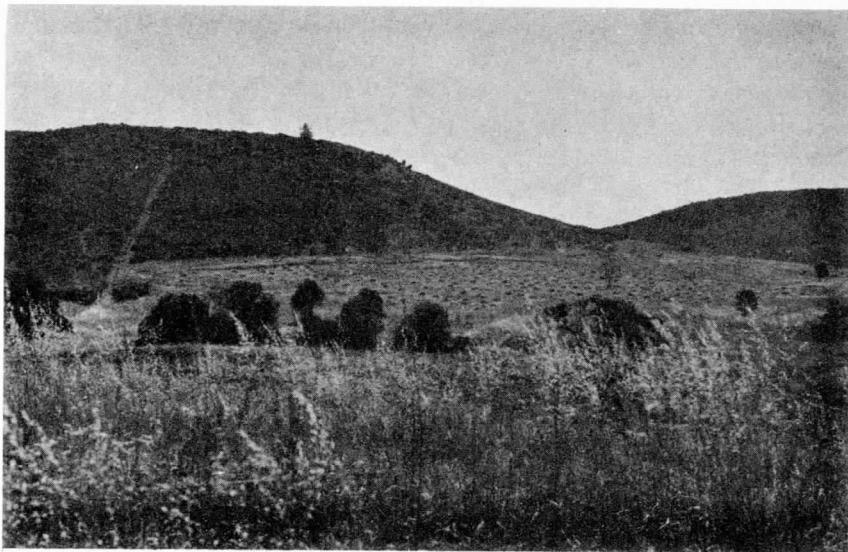
Fire-a Land Clearance Tool?

Fire protection is afforded to four broad land classification categories here in California, one of which for years has presented a particularly troublesome and expensive problem to both the public fire protection agencies and to land-owners wishing to exclude fire from their lands. It is universally agreed that timberlands, primary watershed lands, and grasslands should be kept free of fire if their greatest economic values are to be secured. The use of fire in the fourth land classification category, however, has been a disputable and very controversial subject between ranchers and protection agencies. The problem concerns itself with the great intermediate area of brush land lying between the forest lands and the grasslands which has relatively low range value, secondary watershed value, and no timber value. There are approximately 10,000,000 acres of such brushland in this State ranging from the poorest of soils on steep slopes supporting thin stands of chamise to relatively good soils supporting heavy stands of chaparral composed of oaks, manzanita, ceanothus, etc. Stockmen for years have advocated that fire was the tool necessary to convert this brushland into satisfactory grazing land. As a result, this class of land user has been responsible for a large number of California's man-caused fires. When followed by proper range management practices, properly controlled fire can and has been used to convert some brushlands into areas producing greater economic returns to the livestock industry. Such a program must, however, be conducted in a legal manner and under the control of a fire protection agency so that resulting fires do not require costly assistance from protection crews so vitally needed to cope with normal wild-fire occurrence. Until this legislative session neither the Division of Forestry nor the rancher has had legal means of conducting such a program. The Division supported this year three bills which for the first time established a State interest in "controlled land clearance and revegetation of lands principally used or useful for range and forage purposes." These bills (now laws) established the mechanics whereby a person owning or controlling brush covered lands shall apply for a burning permit and authorizes the Division of Forestry to issue such if the necessary precautions are taken by the proponent and "if it (the Division) determines that the proposed burning of brush can be conducted at a time and in a manner that will reasonably avoid damage to property of others." Forty thousand dollars was also appropriated for experimental and research purposes for determining "the effects of such clearance and the value of such methods with reference to fire protection and prevention, watershed protection and conservation, the prevention of soil erosion, and the increased economic value of such cleared lands insofar as they may be so made available for range and forage purposes."

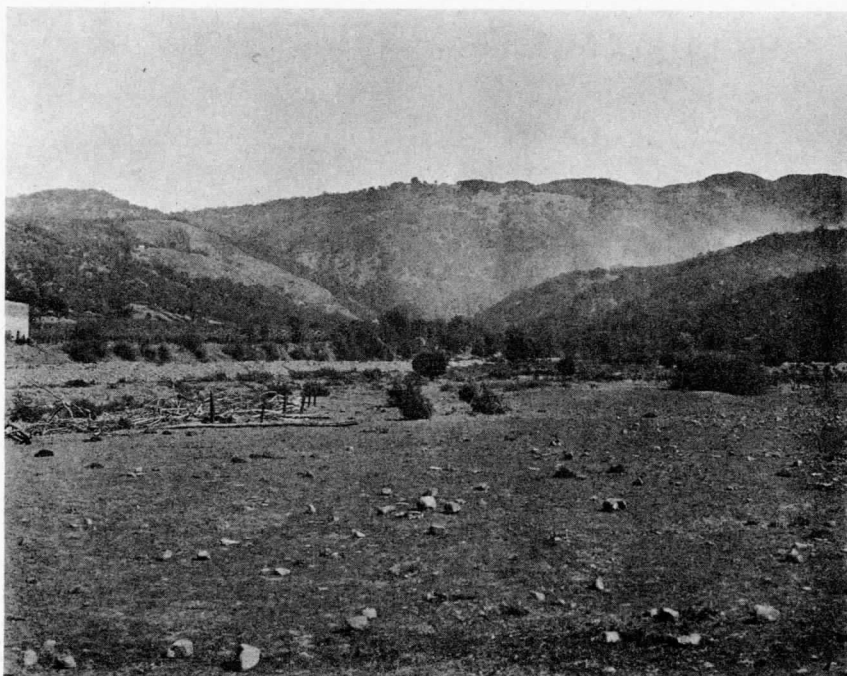
By these laws, and under subsequent policy of the Board of Forestry, 253 permits were issued and 81,913 acres of brushlands were control burned, of which 16,012 acres were burned by escapes in excess of the permit area.

In addition, a special program was set up in Mendocino County, a county in the redwood forest area typically dotted with small ranches dependent on forage from the brush land. Ranchers were contacted and their particular problems worked out on the ground. Of those contacted the majority cooperated completely, but because of many wild-fires Division assistance was limited during the burning period.

After this intensive work and assistance to the ranchers, the summarization of facts and results showed not a single problem but a composite one with many complexities. To name a few we find: (1) Selfish interests seeking special privileges and service. (2) People and groups of people wishing to burn someone else's land for their own benefit. (3) Large numbers of people who are unwilling to assume the responsibility and obligations that go with the privilege of using fire as a tool in their land management. (4) People confronted with a bread and butter economy on admittedly poor range land. (5) Lack of sufficient knowledge to make prior determination of the economic benefits from burning on many soils, slopes, sites, and types. (6) Lack of knowledge as to best reseeding methods as well as an unwillingness on the part of many to make the necessary cash outlay. (7) Lack of land classification defining the areas within which control burns may be profitably used. (8) Inability of the Division of Forestry to cooperate on control burns and at the same time cope with critical wild-fire situations.



Brushland contiguous to pasture-range land on which fire, if properly controlled and followed by reseeding and good range management, could be the most economical land clearance tool.



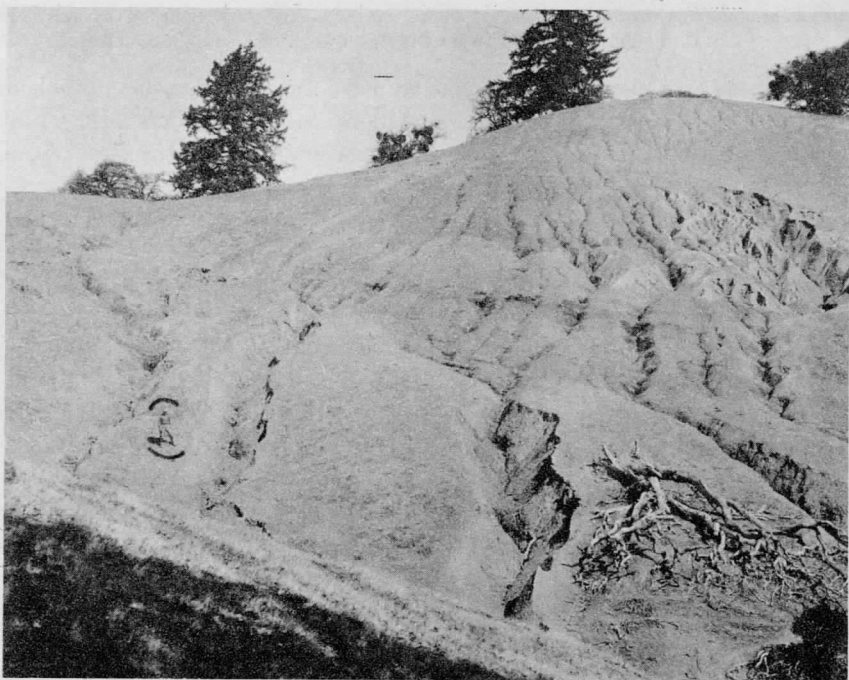
Typical area in Mendocino County where ranchers are dependent on forage from adjacent brush lands.

It will take many seasons before we have the answer to these problems, but an impressive step has been taken by the State in recognition of these problems and their lawful solution. Besides these enabling measures specifically establishing the conditions under which burning may be done, or how fire may be used as a tool of land management in a legal manner, the statutes make it unlawful for a person to wilfully or knowingly allow a fire to burn uncontrolled on lands owned or controlled by him or to allow such fire to escape to lands of another. It has also established a liability on the part of a property owner who permits a fire to escape to the lands of another without exercising due diligence, and it has afforded the Division of Forestry or any other public or private agency the opportunity to collect and reimburse themselves for any and all expenses reasonably incurred in suppressing the fire.

The educational and experimental efforts now being undertaken by the Division in this control burning problem, coupled with the cooperative assistance available to the landowner when the Division is free of wild-fire menace, should make immediate gains in smothering the high percentage of incendiary fires occurring in California. Backed by good laws and a substantial law enforcement policy, the Division expects to gain the understanding and confidence of the landowner and together work out a program to the end of improving the economic values of our wild lands.



The trees on this hillside have first been girdled and then burned to provide more rangeland for the livestock. Note the brush now encroaching on the area.



Unless fire cleared areas are followed by sound range management practices severe erosion results in the complete loss of economic value.