

Forest Fire Numbers Hit New Low During 1956 Despite High Forest Use

Number of forest fires over the nation hit a record low in 1956, although the American people visited and used forest lands more than ever before, the US Department of Agriculture announced today.

A total of 143,485 forest fires were reported in 1956 on private, state, and federal lands—a reduction of 1,695 from the 1955 figure. These figures were compiled by the USDA's Forest Service from reports of state and federal fire fighting agencies.

Despite this favorable showing in fire protection a forest fire was reported on an average of every three and one-half minutes during 1956.

Improvements noted in the 1956 fire picture included progress in forest fire prevention in the South, fewer man-caused fires, and a reduction in the number intentionally set.

Man-caused fires dropped five per cent, largely due to organized prevention campaigns carried on by federal and state agencies, industries, private organizations, and individuals. Most popular of these are the Smokey Bear campaign conducted by the Forest Service and state foresters under sponsorship of The Advertising Council, and the Keep Green programs conducted by states and forest industries.

Improved equipment and better methods of fighting fires reduced the area burned by 1,462,707 acres, down to 6,605,894 acres in 1956. Contributing to this decrease was the fact that organized forest fire protection was extended to an additional 3,148,000 acres, bringing the 1956 total to 607,032,000 acres under protection.

Foresters point out that organized protection makes it possible to spot fires quickly and hit them before they spread.

The south came in for special praise for considerable improvement in its forest fire protection. In 11 States between North Carolina and Texas, the number of fires were reduced by 6,372 from the 1955 total of 109,082. Acreage burned also dropped sharply, from 6,781,536 in 1955 to 5,290,217 acres in 1956—a reduction of 1,491,319 acres.

Much of this improvement was attributed to the Southern Forest Fire Conference of 1955, and followup meetings in each state at which fire fighting agencies, law enforcement agencies, and other interested groups planned a campaign to protect woodlands from fire. As part of this program, organized protection covered 157,906,000 acres in the South last year, compared to 155,619,000 acres in 1955.

Interest in tree planting, which has grown in that region during the past year, also contributed to the reduction in fires. As more people plant trees, they become aware of forest values and more interested in forest fire protection and prevention, foresters explain.

"Unfortunately, a lot of people are still deliberately setting forest fires," Forest Service officials say. "Incendiarists, found largely in the South, still top the list of fire causes on protected lands (Figures are not available on unprotected land.) The 1956 record is improved on this score, however. There were 1,758 fewer fires set deliberately, a reduction from 25,773 in 1955 to 24,015 in 1956."

Oak Wilt Fight In Pennsylvania Most Economical

HARRISBURG — The gigantic survey and eradication program against oak wilt fungus disease in Pennsylvania is the largest in the nation and by far the most efficient and economical, the State Department of Agriculture says.

Aerial and ground crews of the Department began the attack in mid-June against the disease that is costly to farmers and lumbermen. The campaign will continue through September.

Estimated costs of survey and eradication per infected "spot" in Pennsylvania is \$32, the lowest in the nation. This compares with programs which cost as high as \$90. It costs Pennsylvania about 15 cents per square mile for the survey and eradication program.

Estimated costs are based on the number of infections found, according to Dr. Thomas L. Guyton, director of the Bureau of Plant Industry. Nearly 400 infected locations were discovered and destroyed in 1956, 40 per cent fewer than in 1955. So far this year 50 trees have been classed as infected with oak wilt, but the number is below the same period of 1956.

Pennsylvania is the only State in the nation with a program which covers the entire Commonwealth. It also is one of the few states to cut not only the infected tree but all oak trees within root-grafting distance, usually 50 feet or more.

Some acres of the State will be covered six times by the aerial surveyors. Each area will be plotted at least once. Special attention is being given to localities where oak wilt infection has been found in past years.

The complete oak wilt eradication program in Pennsylvania is a cooperative activity with the Department of Agriculture, Department of Forests and Waters and the Pennsylvania State University.

Early Damage by Alfalfa Aphid Not so Heavy as Anticipated

Alfalfa growers have been pleasantly surprised by the comparatively small numbers of spotted alfalfa aphids active through May, the US Department of Agriculture said today.

By June 1, the fastspreading pest had not reached the damaging proportions that it had by the same date in previous years since its discovery in this country in 1954. It now infests 30 States. Eleven Western and Central States listed it among their 10 most important crop insect pests of 1956.

In the Southwest, where the aphid was first found, southern New Mexico has had light to heavy infestations this year. Aphid-eating insects have been an important factor in reducing populations in the Yuma (Ariz.) area.

Utah reported damaging populations in late May according to USDA's Agricultural Research Service cooperative economic insect reports. Insecticidal treatment was necessary in Nye County, Nevada. Nebraska's first spotted alfalfa aphid of the year was taken May 23.

The aphid first crossed the Mississippi River eastward last year. Up to early June 1957, aphid numbers in infested eastern States were generally light. Some honeydew, which the aphids secrete on alfalfa, was reported from areas of North Carolina.

Quarantine or eradication programs against the pest are impractical, because of the insect's habits. For example, it can be spread by air currents and can survive on a number of host plants other than alfalfa. State and Federal agencies are pushing research to develop sound

control measures and to combat the reduced stands, low yields, poor-quality hay, and increased harvesting costs the aphid causes. Research projects include biological control, use of insecticides, and development of resistant varieties.

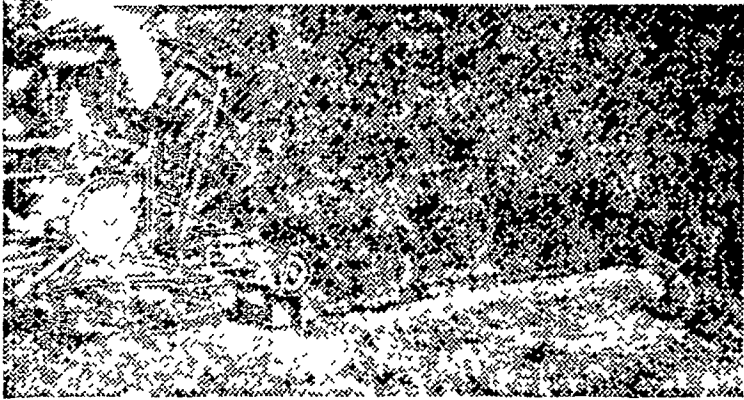
Natural enemies of the aphid include predators, parasites, and fungi. Their success in controlling the pest has varied in different areas, apparently because of environmental differences. Existing enemies, however, are at least able to hold down light infestations.

Despite the formidable names of the aphid-eating predators—pirate bugs, assassin bugs, big-eyed bugs and soldier bugs—they cannot be relied upon to halt losses in heavily infested stands of alfalfa. Search abroad, by California and USDA entomologists, has yielded several additional species of predators, which are being tested in the laboratory against the aphid. Those showing promise will be reared and released in infested States.

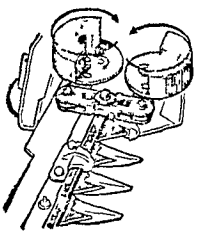
Parasites lay eggs inside the aphid and depend on their offspring to kill the aphid by feeding on its internal organs. "Mummies" of aphids thus killed contain living parasites and can be distributed in aphid infested alfalfa fields. Three different kinds of small parasitic wasps have been imported from France and the Near East by California and USDA's Agricultural Research Service. During 1956, almost 1-1/3 million of these wasps were reared in California and USDA laboratories and released in infested States. More are being bred for release in 1957.

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