Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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From Alaska to Florida, resource managers for the Department of the Interior are watchfully scanning snow and rainfall figures as the first signs of spring appear- - -hoping that last year's disastrous fire record will not recur in 1967.

Over most of the 550 million acres managed by Interior agencies, 1966 was called the worst fire year since 1957, year of the great Alaska fires. Paradoxically, 1965 had been one of the lightest years on record for fire damage. And the prime factor, as usual appeared to be the weather.

A wet winter last year in the Pacific Northwest and other regions brought forth a thick, lush carpet of annual grasses and forest undergrowth, already luxuriant after a damp 1965. Then the rains stopped. Late spring and summer were unusually warm and dry. The dense grass and brush "cured" into tinder, ready for trouble, and it came.

Estimates of damage to Interior-managed lands alone during 1966 ran close to $15 million, not including the more than $7.5 million spent on suppression of fires. Nearly 1 million acres were swept by wildfire. In many instances, notably within the national parks and in other areas heavily used by wildlife, no meaningful dollar figure could be fixed for the losses that occurred--but the impact will continue to be felt.

Of the 2,914 fires recorded on Interior's lands during the year, 1,678 were attributed to lightning and 1,236 to human activity. Firefighters for the Bureau of Land Management, which administers most of the territory and experienced most of the damage, credited "intensive fire prevention programs and apparent public cooperation" for holding down the incidence of man-caused fires.

Many of the worst fires were man-caused, however. The Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Park Service, and Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife blamed people for most of the damage sustained by their areas during the year. Causes ranged from careless handling of machinery to letting trash fires get out of control, and in at least one notable case, to arson.

The year's costliest fire on Interior-managed lands occurred in August, when a man-caused blaze spread through heavy timber along both sides of Oxbow Ridge, about 25 miles southwest of Eugene, Ore. Eventually it reached across 41,600 acres of public and private timberlands, with heavy losses of prime Douglas fir. BLM lands comprised about 24, 000 acres of this total, and the Bureau estimated its timber loss at $7 million.

In grazing country south of Twin Falls, Idaho, a midsummer grass fire ignited by lightning raced across 45, 000 acres in less than six hours. When it finally was brought under control, this blaze had burned 52, 200 acres, some 30 percent Federally owned. Damage totaled close to $1. 25 million, including the loss of more than 1, 000 head of sheep and cattle and 100 miles of range fence. "The loss of wildlife habitat and recreation values will be felt for years," BLM officials said of this fire.

But the farthest-reaching and longest-burning of all the year's fires-- in fact, the worst since 1957 on

Interior-managed lands--occurred in east central Alaska, near the Canadian border. Started by lightning, it burned across 203, 000 acres of caribou range and timber for nearly three months, despite the best efforts of smokejumpers, ground crewmen and aircraft armed with chemical fire retardants. Damages were estimated at about $2 million. It destroyed large areas of grazing land which had supported the caribou herds on which many of the natives of Alaska and the neighboring Yukon Territory depend for food, plus some prime recreation and hunting grounds for both Alaskans and tourists.

Some of the firefighters employed in battling this blaze were flown in from as far away as Boise, Idaho, where BLM maintains an Interagency Fire Center. This installation, in its first full year of operation, had its hands full during 1966 trying to control blazes that covered more than the total acreage burned on BLM lands during all four years from 1962 through 1965.

Two of the largest fires on national park lands were man-caused, occurring in Everglades National Park, Fla., during April and May. They scorched more than 2,700 acres of grassland important to the survival of native wildlife, already decimated by the effects of a several-year drought.

Yellowstone National Park, the Nation's oldest and perhaps its best loved, was damaged by two lightning fires which burned for three days late in July across 245 acres in Montana and Wyoming.

Like BLM, the National Park Service said most fires were kept small by fast and aggressive action on the part of fire control crews, and by use of helicopters and other aircraft for detection and suppression.

Indian lands also suffered a higher incidence of fires, and a higher damage figure, than in the two previous years. The chief blame was as signed to people who had started out to burn piles of debris and let the blazes get out of control. Alert fire crews held all but 17 of the 1,251 fires on Indian lands to less than 300 acres. Considering problems caused by the weather, BIA authorities felt they got off about as well as could be expected--somewhere near the long term average.

On wildlife refuges and game ranges managed by the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, 1966 was rated the fourth best in 24 years of reporting. Still, more than 12,700 acres were burned in 25 States.

“The general public is by far the greatest cause of fires on Bureau lands," said a summary report prepared by BSFW. "Over 75 percent of the fires were man-caused, mostly by neighbors, through land occupancy and equipment." The two largest fire s on these lands were a 7,250-acre blaze started accidentally by a welder in Idaho, and a 1,273 -acre forest fire in South Carolina touched off by an arsonist. Together, these accounted for 68 percent of the total area burned on Bureau lands during 1966, and more than 50 percent of the values lost.