

The Truth About Ontario's Forest Protection System

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In the face of the appalling forest fire tragedy in Northern Ontario, press and public are inquiring diligently as to the causes of forest fires, the methods of fire prevention, and are asking very frankly if the Provincial Government can entirely shake off responsibility for the heavy harvest of death and destruction.

The sacrifice of timber wealth, of entire towns, of maturing crops, has been a severe blow, particularly at a time when the guarding and developing of national wealth are accepted as keys to victory in the World War, but the conscience of the public has been far more deeply affected by the sacrifice of unreplaceable lives.

The time to block forest conflagrations is, paradoxically, before they commence. Well-organized forest protection systems in British Columbia, Nova Scotia and sections of Quebec, as well as in the United States and Europe, have demonstrated the comparative ease of preventing fires from starting. After the fire is well under way, the same carefully organized systems can usually succeed in isolating the flames and greatly reducing the damage. Success in preventing and in fighting forest fires pre-supposes a condition of affairs to which the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests is yet a stranger. Nothing but a radical overhauling of the forest service of the province can give the people any assurance that 1917 will not witness a catastrophe even more violent.

In the first place, the forest service of Ontario is built on a very old model. While spending \$300,000 a year on "protection" not more than a portion of that sum is represented in "value received."

The patrol of areas such as the "Claybelt" makes no pretense at thoroughness; educational work in fire prevention has been very slight,

and the flimsiest provision made against such fearful onslaughts of flames as have now taken their ghastly toll.

Ontario, outside the Reserves, possesses very little equipment as telephone lines, trails, highways, lookout towers and cabins, such as are absolutely essential to any effective system of defence against fire.

Real "Rights" of Settlers.

One particular point of deficiency, emphasized by the recent fires, is in the ability to control settlers' burning operations. Quebec, British Columbia and Nova Scotia empower their fire guardians to penalize a settler who starts a clearing fire without written permission from a qualified ranger. In dry hot spells fires of all kinds may be absolutely prohibited in prescribed areas, and at all times, even of comparative safety, slash is piled properly or fire lines cut around the clearing. Ontario takes no such precautions, although representations to that effect have been energetically made to the Government year after year. The settler is allowed to burn precisely as carelessness or ignorance may dictate and annual holocausts will remain possible until that "liberty" is sensibly curtailed.

The settlers going into Northern Ontario have a perfect right to demand that their lives and property shall be guarded by the Government to the best of its power. The recent fires doubtless helped to clear some land for agriculture, but for every acre so assisted, probably four or five acres of non-agricultural tree-growing land were affected disastrously. Certainly the danger of future fires has increased, as the areas of fire-killed timber widen, so that in a year or two, a mass of windfallen debris will present a perfect target for fresh conflagrations. If forest protection was needed early in 1916, to prevent the tragedy that has now occurred, it will be needed vastly more to offset a recurrence on a far worse scale in years to come.

If evidence were needed that the

forest protection system of Ontario requires a far-reaching and determined overhauling, that evidence will be found in a perusal of the 1915 report of the Ontario Department of Lands, Forests, and Mines. Both by what the report states and by what it neglects to state, may be judged the wisdom of the Canadian Forestry Association's efforts to cause a re-organization of the Ontario ranger service, and place forest guarding among the creditable performances of the provincial government.

Two or three facts stand forth clearly: Neither the Ontario Government, the wood-using industries, nor the general public have more than a remote knowledge of the annual losses from forest fires. Only in patches of the forested area, mostly along the railways, is any consistent effort made to more than note the number of fires. The character of the timber destroyed, its acreage, etc., are immeasurably the most important features and under the present system are not reported on by the rangers and supervisors in anything even approaching an adequate way.

Why This Difference?

The Ontario limit holders are paying for their fire ranging considerably more than twice as much per acre as the limit holders included in the St. Maurice or Lower Ottawa Protective Associations of Quebec, although the protection afforded the latter is superior.

It is a well-established fact that railways, taken as a whole, are no longer the main source of timber losses throughout the Dominion. This is, to a very large extent, directly due to the increased efficiency of the railway fire protective organization, working under the regulations of the Railway Commission. These regulations impose stringent requirements in the direction of fire protective appliances on locomotives, control of right-of-way clearing operations, patrol of forest sections, action by all regular railway employees in reporting and extin-