

FOREST FIRES AND RAILWAYS

The vicinity to a forest of a railway either in construction or operation makes the danger of fires more intense. This is partly due to causes connected with the railway itself, and partly due to the crowds of land-seekers, prospectors, freighters, tramps and other people equipped more or less generally with a fine bump of irresponsibility who accompany or follow it. The record of each year's conflagrations shows the railways well up in the list of the causes of forest fires. If they do not lead they always follow close in the black array. It is of interest, then, to consider the relation of the railways to forest fires. In doing so the subject will be confined to the fires which are due directly to the railways.

Fires Arising from Railway Construction.

In the construction of the railway it is necessary that the right of way should be thoroughly cleared. If dead tops, limbs and stumps are left scattered over the right of way or piled just outside of it, as has usually been done, they become a veritable fire-trap, and the destruction of the surrounding forest is an inevitable consequence sooner or later. The regulations for clearing the right of way adopted by the Trans-continental Railway Commission are now being generally followed. They provide as follows:—

'The whole, or as much of the right of way as the engineer may direct, shall be entirely cleared of all trees, logs, brush and other perishable matter, all of which shall be burnt or otherwise disposed of as the engineer may direct, unless specially reserved to be made into timber, ties or cordwood. Unless directed in writing by the engineer, trees and brush must not be thrown on adjacent lands, but must be disposed of on the right of way. Trees unavoidably falling outside of the right of way must be cut up, removed to right of way and disposed of.'

But the establishing of a regulation is not the carrying of it out, and in order to ensure the carrying out of such regulations as these thoroughly it is necessary to place a fire patrol along the line of construction. This has been done along the line of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway through Dominion territory west of Edmonton with good results. Fire from the right of way has not burned forty acres outside its limits, although the right of way has been cleared and burned thoroughly in that district. But the ranger in charge had to use authority and judgment. Some contractors were allowing debris to gather close against the edge of the right of way where, when burned, it would lead fire into the forest. These contractors were stopped and made to clear a space between the brush heap and the forests. In the dry and dangerous season of the year the ranger prohibited burning altogether. The engineers of the railway company, the contractors and the forest rangers all worked cordially together to attain the desired object.

With such regulations and with a good fire patrol to supervise their enforcement the danger should be largely obviated. The uncertainties of handling fire are, however, well illustrated by an incident which occurred in the clearing of the right of way on the construction of the Canadian Northern Railway north of Prince Albert. The refuse was being burned on the right of way and the clearing gang was watching the fire. A small whirlwind came down the right of way, lifted the fire and threw it into the bush over the men's heads and, before it could be stopped, nearly a square mile of bush was burned. In dry, windy weather such a danger is always present, and it gives pause to those who are responsible for the administration when the promiscuous use of fire for clearing land after lumbering operations or on other occasions is advocated.