

Some Observations on Indian Forests and Prescribed Burning

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I AM GLAD to have a part in the Ninth Tall Timbers Fire Ecology Conference and serve as Co-chairman for this session. Foresters in the Bureau of Indian Affairs are acquiring an increasingly high regard for the efforts of the Tall Timber Research Station in providing a meaningful forum for research findings and resource management experience in the use of controlled fire. We are grateful for the identification and recognition given by this station to some few of our foresters who pioneered in prescribed burning most notably in the ponderosa pine forests. We were especially pleased that Harold Weaver, now retired from our Bureau, was included in the dedication of the California Tall Timbers Fire Ecology Conference of November 1967 along with such outstanding leaders as Herbert L. Stoddard, Sr., Dr. Homer L. Shantz and Dr. Harold Biswell.

Harold Weaver's work and reports on prescribed burning were the basis for his winning the highest honor of the Department of the Interior—the Distinguished Service Award.

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The first session of this conference has given us an insight into many areas with the interesting and thought provoking papers presented. I am sure that this session with emphasis on management aspects of prescribed burning will prove equally interesting. Two of the presentations will be concerned with the treatment of Indian forest lands. As a prelude to these, I would like to sketch a broad description of these forests and the Indian-Federal Government relationship that exists in their management.

The United States presently holds in trust a little over 50 million acres of Indian land. About a fourth of this or 13 million acres is classed as forest. Five and one-half million acres are currently considered commercially important for timber production supporting virgin and reserve stands of about 40 billion board feet. Although located on reservations in 21 states with a wide variety of species and timber types, the most extensive and valuable are the Indian ponderosa forests of the Northwest and Southwest. Based upon the most recent inventory data, growth projections, and calculations of allowable cuts, we believe the Indian forests can sustain an annual commercial timber harvest of about 1.04 billion board feet. We are hopeful that this cut can be achieved next year. We are also confident that the allowable cuts can be raised in the future by application of more intensive management practices.

Indian forests are becoming increasingly important in the economy of the Indian people. Stumpage income alone will exceed \$23 million yearly at the allowable cut level and, more importantly, the harvest generates about 7,300 jobs directly in logging and milling and about 4,750 supporting and service-type jobs with a combined annual wage potential in excess of \$50 million.

Although only a part of the actual employment now flows to Indians, tribal leaders with commercial forests on their reservations are becoming enthusiastically aware of the many benefits available from these properties. They want a bigger bite out of their forest resources than just stumpage payments. They want their people to fill most of the jobs that are generated and they want to participate in the industrial and other business opportunities that their resource supports—and they are doing just that. More and more Indian tribes are constructing and operating their own manufacturing facilities or

entering into participating arrangements with non-Indian plants. Individual Indians are controlling a growing number of the logging enterprises. On some reservations where the tribal governing bodies have not chosen to assume the risks and heavy investments of modern wood processing plants, they may require the location and construction of such plants on the reservation as a condition of their timber sale offerings. This surge of interest to improve the lot of their people through the utilization of their forests extends into the actual management of the resource itself. They increasingly involve themselves into the details of all phases of forest practices looking toward the long run as well as for short term goals. They are concerned about the costs of forest management, especially so because the Federal Government charges the Indians for forestry services rendered by the Bureau. The Indians are, therefore, interested in improving efficiency and in applying practices such as prescribed burning that promise to cut management costs.

Indian forests are unique in the sense that they are owned by the Indians but are managed, pursuant to Federal Statutes, by the Federal Government in consultation with the Indians. Thus, these forests (I refer only to those forests held by the United States in trust for the Indians) have some characteristics of both private and public property. Historically, conceptions of tribal property have oscillated between the two limits of public property and private property.

From a practical management standpoint it is clear that Indian forests must be managed in the best interests of the Indian owners, and that the Federal Government, as trustee, is accountable for the management. Indians can, and have successfully brought suit against the United States for losses suffered by reason of improper management. As a consequence, in the treatment of Indian forests, in cutting practices, in development, and in protection including the application of prescribed burning the best interest of the Indian owners must, of course, be paramount—but there must also be the recognition of possible liability on the part of the United States, if later events prove that the action taken was not in fact best for the owners.

An understanding of this special trustee-beneficiary relationship is helpful to explain the care that must be exercised in the application of some forest practices. Prescribed burning falls in this category.

Because of their own historical practices, the Indians are often more receptive to the application of fire as a forest management tool than the trustee, who often must indulge in a careful weighing of the risks involved. This is the basis of the requirement of detailed advance prescription burn plans which must carry not only the solid endorsement of the governing body of the tribe but the specific approval of a responsible line officer of the Bureau for the trustee.

The application of prescribed burning techniques on Indian reservations (I do not include slash disposal from logging either by broadcast or pile and burn methods as prescriptive burning) has been accomplished under approved programs for many years. It has been conducted on Indian lands in the Lake States, on the Seminole Reservation in Florida, on the Colville Reservation in Washington and on several reservations in the Southwest most notably on the Fort Apache in Arizona which will be covered in detail by Paul Truesdell and Harry Kallander on the program. The record of accomplishments through the efforts of these and other pioneering and often courageous foresters have helped gain increasing acceptance of the practice with confidence on the part of the trustee. In this same manner, the proceedings of the Tall Timbers Fire Ecology Conference help support the wise application of prescribed burning techniques for the production of timber, forage and wildlife.