

THE 1947 MAINE FIRES: THE LAST GREAT FIRES IN NEW ENGLAND?

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ABSTRACT

In 1947 wildfires burned more than 85,400 ha of forest and rural agricultural land in Maine. Thirteen people were killed; nearly a half dozen towns were almost completely destroyed; total damage exceeded \$150,000,000 (in 1988 dollars). More than half of the 700 fires that burned in Maine in 1947 burned a major portion of the acreage during the one-week period in late October. Two major fire complexes—one in the southwestern portion of the state and one on Mt. Desert Island (MDI) on the coast—caused most of the property damage.

Total precipitation for 1947 was near the long-term average of 101 cm, but precipitation during October (< 0.5 cm) was the lowest recorded in Maine for any single month. October precipitation at Bar Harbor on MDI was only 0.05 cm. Strong winds accompanying a dry cold front caused catastrophic fire conditions on October 23, 1947.

This paper reviewed the conditions that gave rise to the 1947 fires in general and focused on the MDI fire in particular. Fire records and vegetation histories for Acadia National Park on MDI suggest that large fires like those which burned in 1947 have occurred and might be expected to continue to occur at 100- to 150-year intervals. Conditions during the 200 years since settlement by Europeans may not be typical of prehistoric conditions, however, and it is possible that catastrophic large fires were uncommon prior to the 18th century AD. Implications of different fire regimes for National Park Service fire management policy at Acadia were discussed.