

Giant Forest, September 10, 1926

The Director,
National Park Service,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Sir:

I am submitting the following report with map of the Kaweah fire of August 6th to September 8th. The fire is, on this date, under control but several men must be kept to watch the line until embers expire or rains occur.

ORIGIN – INCINDIARY

On August 6th fire started in brush and chaparral two miles above Aukland and some ten miles west from the park boundary. Persons passing on the Badger road soon after the fire have stated that there were several distinct points of conflagration along side the road as if someone had dropped balls of fire from an automobile in motion. I think there is little doubt that the fire was deliberately started by cattlemen or foothill residents who wished to burn up an impassable tangle of brush in order that grass would grow more readily so that cattle, sheep, or horses might have better feed. It is the general opinion of the Forest Service that the fire was of incendiary origin.

PROGRESS – OUTSIDE THE PARK

The fire burned practically uncontrolled on private lands and by August 15th had covered 30,000 acres of rolling foothills, wild oat land, chaparral, and live oak timber. On August 15th it threatened the Sequoia National Forest area and the U. S. F. S. put on a crew of 125 men at 6 P.M. August 15th and back fired from four roads near Badger. All back fires were unavailing.

On August 16th I left Giant Forest on a trip to the high Sierras, but seeing the smoke beyond the west park boundary and having reports from General Grant Park of the fire, I sent Park Ranger Lawrence F. Cook with seven men to assist in extinguishing the fire west of the park boundary and to be sure that it did not cross the new boundary line on the North Fork River, which I felt sure could be held. At 9 P.M. August 16th twenty-two more men went to the fire from Giant Forest and back fired a line from end of Eshom Road to the North Fork River - 2 miles. At that time this was the only point at which the park was threatened.

However, that night a forty mile gale rendered all precautions useless and swept the fire on a six-mile front over the North Fork River and the Park boundary.

FIRE IN THE PARK

As it was useless to attempt to hold the fire in the chaparral on the west park boundary between the North Fork and the pine belt on Pine Ridge the crew was moved around by road some forty miles to the Black Oak Trail and headquarters was established at the trail camp at Hidden Springs on Pine Ridge. One hundred and forty-five additional men were placed on the line making a total of about two hundred, and on August 19th a line was established from the point where Redwood Creek joins the North Fork over Pine Ridge to the mouth of Cow Creek and it looked as though the fire would be held on that line. However, on August 21st the fire jumped the North Fork River and a new point from outside the park and swept up Cactus Ridge and also crossed the North Fork from outside the park near the mouth of Redwood Creek flanking both fire lines and sweeping up before a high wind to the pine timber.

With forty fresh men the fire was controlled along Cactus Creek on August 26th and on Pine Ridge on September 1st. On September 8th fire lines were completed so as to isolate the burned area and danger to other park timber was practically over. However, there remains within the burned area some thousand acres of brush and pine timber smoldering and which must be watched until rains finally extinguish the fire.

FIRE ORGANIZATION

I was on a high mountain trip from August 16th to August 20th. On the night of the twentieth I arrived at Sugarloaf Meadow and some presage of danger to the park caused me to arise early on the morning of the twenty-first and leave Chief Ranger Hopping and my party at Sugarloaf Meadow and ride as fast as possible to Lodge Pole Camp, 25 miles, where I arrived at 10 A. M. August 21st. I found that Acting Superintendent Tobin had taken all possible steps and had over two hundred men on the fire line under Park Ranger Cook. That afternoon I made an inspection by automobile down the North Fork Road of the fire line near Burdick's Ranch. I quickly saw that the fire line was so extensive that I could not grasp the whole problem without an airplane view so telegraphed to the District Forester at San Francisco for a Forest Service Airplane receiving answer that it would be at Fresno for me on the morning of August 22nd. I proceeded to Fresno that morning and flew for two hours over the park and the burned area in a D.H. Ship, getting a splendid view of the fire and an opportunity to study the terrain on the fire line which could only have been obtained otherwise by several days on foot and horseback. On returning to Fresno I telephoned instructions for changes on the fire line and also laid off one hundred men whom I considered surplus. It is no exaggeration to say that this airplane trip saved the government several hundred dollars a day in labor alone for a period of several days.

I later made two horseback inspections of the fire line and in order to get the fire under control we had to build up a thorough organization with a base camp on the North Fork Road and a pack train of twenty-five animals running to and from the fire line, and a five mile ground telephone line secured from the Forest Service was laid right to the fire line. Also I found it advisable to lay off practically all the fire fighting crew secured from Valley ranches and use a smaller crew of more experienced men from the foothills or mountains.

DAMAGE – OUTSIDE THE PARKER

The fire burned between 60 and 80,000 acres of brush and timber. Inside the park it has burned not less than 8,000 acres of chaparral and small timber and 3,000 of fir, cedar, yellow and sugar pine. Except in small sections where fire was exceptionally hot, or debris on the ground more abundant than usual, few trees above two feet in size have been killed, but most of the reproduction has been wiped out. A small un-named grove of *Sequoia gigantea* near Hidden Spring was burned over but no large trees seriously injured. One clump of eight young Sequoias in this grove was killed. No trees in the Muir Grove were damaged, although the fire was stopped within one hundred feet of the grove in several places.

SUMMARY AND LESSONS

In general the fire did some good in that it has reduced the fire hazard on the west park boundary for a number of years, particularly in the great accumulation of brush and debris on the steep slopes approaching the Muir Grove. It was inevitable that this area should burn at some time, and the longer the fire was deferred the more serious the eventual conflagration.

The only damage to the chaparral area below 4000-5000 feet is to be expected if heavy rains occur this fall before the grass and brush puts out new roots to hold the soil. This occurred during one of our fires in 1924 when rains of almost cloudburst proportions succeeded the dry season and eroded considerable areas of chaparral belt.

As we have spent about \$20,000 on the fire a lesson should be derived that it is economy to spend money on fire prevention rather than on fire extinction. With a crew of thirty to forty men we cleared a twenty-foot belt for two miles around the Muir Grove within two or three days, and I believe that for less than \$5,000 a complete fire break might have been established along the west park boundary combined with a trail and telephone line which would have enabled better control and early control.

This fire also confirms my conviction that the more roads we have through the heavily forested belt of the park between the 4000 and 7500 feet the better for fire control as well as to make that portion of the park, little used by pack parties, accessible to the motoring public.

When the Generals' Highway is constructed we should clear a belt 200 feet on each side of the road, cleaning up the accumulation of fallen timber and trash. This will vastly improve the scenery from the road and will enable the growth of flowers and flowering shrubs and ferns in place of the inflammable mass of fallen timber,

I cannot close this report without recommending highly for services rendered during the fire Park Ranger Lawrence F. Cook and Ranger William Smith, both of whom were almost continuously on duty for three weeks and who did not leave the fire line until completely exhausted. Furthermore, they showed intelligence in directing fire crews.

Respectfully yours,

John R. White,
Superintendent

Final cost: \$19,309.19