
Significant Fire Years

A Media Perspective Taken from the Prince George Citizen Newspaper (1912-1961)



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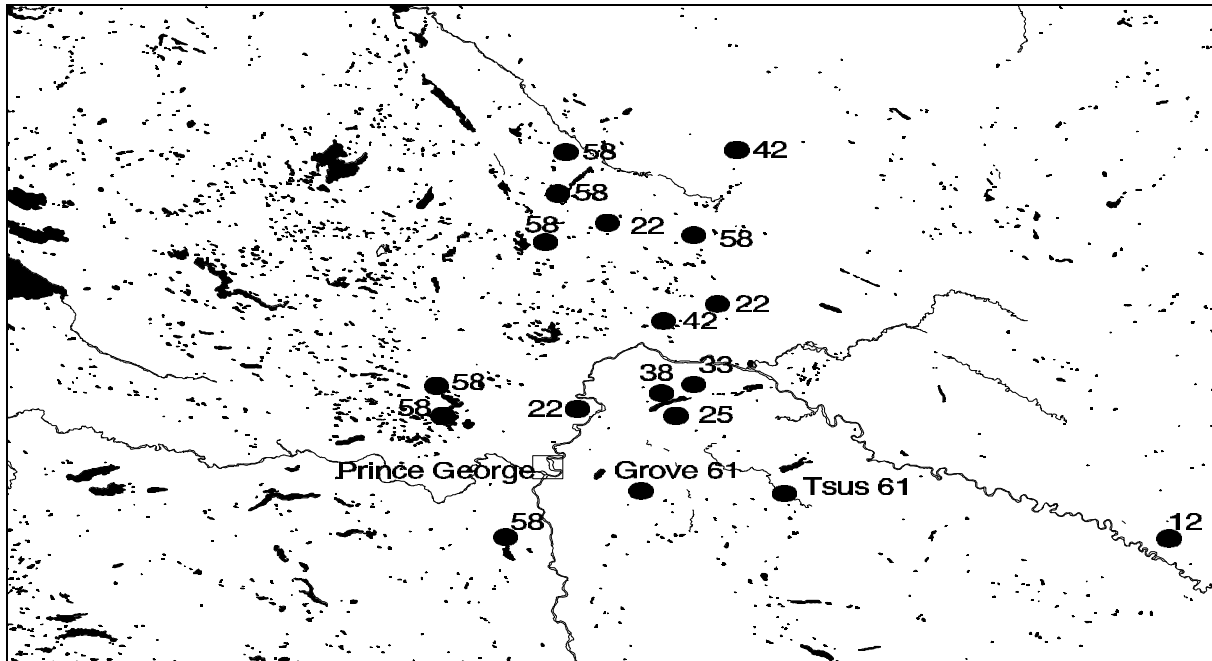
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Photograph credits are provided at the bottom of each photo and not included in this section.



General locations of some of the significant fires in the Prince George Region from 1912 to 1961.

Introduction

One of the ways the public obtains local fire information and receives fire prevention messages, in the Prince George area, is from local newspaper (e.g. Prince George Citizen) articles. B.C. Ministry of Forests Protection Branch fire records indicated a number of significant fire years in the Prince George area. Microfilm records in the Prince George library were examined for those fire years to find newspaper articles discussing fire related topics. Television was not brought to Prince George until 1958, so this was not sought as a major source of media information.

The purpose of this paper is to describe, from a newspaper media's perspective, changes in how fires were fought, reported, and described from 1912-1961 for significant fire years. The headlines are listed to provide a quick look at the fire topics discussed and highlights during the fire season. A brief description of some newspaper articles is provided. Other issues such as settlement, the development of the forest industry and changes in the B.C. Forest Service are discussed to help put the changes in fire control and public perception of fire into perspective. A final section is provided to briefly described some of the changes in fire control since 1961. A brief search was made for old photographs of fires and related subjects to add an additional perspective to this report.

The provincial fire statistics for the fire years mention in this report are listed below. Not all significant fire years in the Prince George region were necessarily bad years on a provincial scale, although most were associated with these years.

YEAR	NO.	SIZE (HA)
1912	347	64 083
1916	864	65 273
1919	1141	175 557
1920	1251	157 770
1922	2591	634 806
1924	2174	162 776
1925	2521	414 327
1926	2147	267 049
1933	1082	122 011
1938	2412	288 072
1942	1414	180 716
1958	3058	835 876
1961	3102	496 631

The Fires of 1912

Headlines

June 22 Forest Fires Raging from the Big Canyon to Tete Jaune

The earliest record (before fire maps were kept by the B.C. Forest Service) found was in an article printed on June 22, 1912. The South Fort George Saturday paper reported that forest fires were raging from the Big Canyon to Tete Jaune Cache, on the Fraser river covering a distance of 240 km, on both sides of the Fraser river valley. An estimated total area burned was around 28,300 ha taken from the B.C. Forest Service annual report. A government timber reserve (probably for the railroad) was burned between the headwaters of the Fraser (near Jasper National Park) and Moose Lake (near Mount Robson Provincial Park).

The paper indicated that there had not been this kind of fire since Sir Alexander Mackenzie paddled down the Fraser 107 years before this time period. The article also mentioned major fires in vicinity of Stuart and Fraser Lakes. Also closer to Prince George there were fires extending south of South Fort George 13 km and then over to Poncho Lake. Strong southerly winds were responsible for the rapid spread of fires. The fires were of a concern because they were burning up some of the best timber holdings in the Cariboo, being 75% cedar and 25% spruce. The fires were also reported as destroying most of the railroad camps in the area, with railroad personnel required to take to boats and rafts to escape the fires. There was no mention of what caused this fire in this article.

Village of Willow River Threatened in 1916 Fire

Headlines

May 27 Disastrous Forest Fire Threatens Willow River

May 31 Destructive Fires

June 3 Forest Fire Outlook

June 7 Forest Fires Numerous

On May 27, 1916 the village of Willow River was "ringed" by fire which was being driven by high winds. The District forester Marvin marshaled 100 fire fighters in half-an-hour and had them sent on a donated train from the Grand Trunk Pacific immediately. The fire was so intense that it jumped the Fraser river in two places. Other forest fires in the Aleza lake district were reported to be

responsible for several homes being destroyed and women and children barely escaping with their lives because of the rapid rate-of-spread. A man named Yates, living in the area was found guilty of causing some of these fires and was fined \$50 but chose two weeks in jail instead. A total of 42,000 ha was reported burned in the Prince George area based on the B.C. Forest Service annual report.

The years 1919 and 1920 - Few Fires but Settlement, Logging Activities, and Road Building Continues

Headlines

Year 1919

September 24

*...welcome the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire...tomorrow
Many Settlers Are coming To Central B. C.
Immigration From United States During Month Of July*

October 8 Good Wagon Road to Summit Lake

Year 1920

*April 30 Work Has Started on Six-Mile Lake Road
Rattenbury Company Brings In Settlers*

May 14 Twenty Billion Feet of Pulp Wood Going Begging In District

May 28 New Sawmill Company To Operate At Shelly

June 4 Season Of Road Work Is Now Commencing

June 18 Land Settlement Area Here Will Shortly Be Thrown Open

June 30 Information Upon Terms Of The Land Settlement Act

*July 9 Struck By Lightning: Unconscious Eight Hours
Special Train Carrying 200 American Tourists Stops Over
Tomorrow Night*

*July 16 Mill Is Burned
American Tourists Were Delighted With Their Visit
...West Lake was the Mecca of picnic parties on Sunday*

Tourists and Visitors

Prince George in these early years was becoming more well known around the world, with some interest shown by dignitaries and tourists. The city was visited

by the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, England in 1919. A special train carrying 200 American tourists stopped in Prince George. The newspaper reported that they were delighted with their visit. These early tourists did not probably contribute to the occurrence of forest fires, although later in the 1930's - 1960's, visitors did more hunting and fishing which placed them out in the forested areas.

New Roads and Railroads Needed for Settlement

The influx of settlers and loggers to the area was assisted greatly by the early development of a road network, as well as, the railway system which was well established since 1915 when the Grand Trunk Pacific (GTP) was completed to Prince George from Edmonton. In 1919, it was reported that a first-class wagon road had just been completed to Summit Lake, which was the point of embarkation over the water route to the Peace River country. As will be described later, there were many person-caused fires in 1922, which might have started from people traveling from Prince George to the Dawson Creek area over this route. In 1920, the Northern Construction Co. commenced work on a road to Six-Mile Lake. A road through to McBride was not completed until the late 1950's. The GTP railway provided most of the required access for logging and settlement in these early years up the Fraser. The roads were not always in the best shape as indicated in an article that described West Lake as a Mecca for picnic parties on Sundays in spite of the poor road.

Early Settlement of the Prince George Area

Headlines in 1920 indicated that many settlers were coming to central B.C. After a two week trip through central B. C., an estimated one thousand families had taken up land in this territory during this year, of which possibly two hundred were returning soldiers from the war. Lumber industries were reported to be unusually active, with thirty or forty mills in operation. These provided additional employment for the early settlers. Immigration from U.S. during the month of July was reported to be 2,053 to Canada, of which, 111 had come to British Columbia.

The Rattenbury land company was reported to be bringing in settlers to the Prince George area. Settlers with capital were reported to be settling in the Prince George and Vanderhoof areas (e.g. farmer from Edmonton purchased 3,000 acres at Pinchi lake, forty miles north of Vanderhoof and another prairie man secured a 300 acre farm twenty miles south of Prince George). Beautiful weather during June, 1920 seemed to favorably impress the new settlers to buy land. On June 18, 1920, a land settlement area was reported to be opening soon, with the Hon. E. D. Barrow, Minister of Agriculture, making the

announcement. About 91 square kilometres to the south of Prince George was opened.

The Forest Industry Grows

The forest industry was starting to grow in the Prince George area. In 1920, a newspaper article reported that twenty billion board feet of pulp wood was going begging in the district because a commodity shortage was causing a curtailment of printing all over the world. Prices were soaring because of the underproduction of pulp. A pulp mill was not built in Prince George until the early 1960's in spite of this demand. Sawmills were being built throughout the Prince George district with a new sawmill at Shelly reported to have started production. Also mills were in danger of being burned, as illustrated by an article on July 16, 1920 where a shingle and lath mill at Guilford was totally destroyed by fire.

One interesting item that was reported on July 9, 1920 was a story about a bridge crewman that was struck by lightning and was unconscious for eight hours. He woke up with very little side effects from the jolt.

The Fires of 1922 - An Awakening to the Need for Fire Prevention and Forest Protection to Ensure Future Wood Supplies

Headlines

- April 4 District Forester Back From Exploration*
- Idle Forest Land Must Grow Timber*
- April 11 Preparations Made To Run The Big Giscome Mill*
- April 28 The Giscome Mill*
- May 19 New Mill At Foreman Ready For The Cut*
- May 26 Aleza Lake Mill Will Start Sawing Immediately*
- Forest Fire Hazard*
- The Forest Fires*
- May 30 Several Forest Fires are Blazing In the District*
- Banker and Mill Owner Have Exciting Experience*
- June 6 Prosecutions are Pending Against Forest Fire Bugs*
- June 9 The Forest Wealth*
- Briscoe's Mill Burned Up On Wednesday Night*
- Giscome Mill Will Start Cutting On The 19th*
- June 13 Fires in All Directions Create Heavy Smoke Pall*

- June 16 Forest Fires Wreaking Havoc with Remote Timber*
June 30 Vanderhoof Threatened by a Bad Bush Fire
Frost Mill Will Start Cutting Early Next Week
July 7 Carelessness With Fire Leads to Prosecution
Fire Losses
Giscome Mill Commenced Cutting Last Friday
J. D. McArthur Has Bought Site For Big Sawmill on Hudson's Bay Land
July 11 Showers of Rain Drench Destructive Forest Fires
Fire Losses
Giscome Mill Commenced Cutting last Friday
Rainmaker Could Cop Off Millions in British Columbia
Need Of Rain is General Throughout B. C.
Further Convictions Under The Forest Act
July 14 Telegraph Lines In Grip Of Elements
July 28 Fire Menace Again a Very Serious Thing
Flier Dreams Of An Aerial Fire Engine
August 1 Metal Plane Forced Back by Dense Smoke
Forest Fire Fells Telegraph Lines
Camper Careless With His Fire - Fined \$25
Bad Fire Loss
Forest Fires in Endako and Ootsa Lake
August 4 Forest Fires Have Destroyed Much Game
August 8 Rain Storms Bring Relief In Timber Fires
Giscome Mill Running Like Faultless Machine
August 11 P. G. E. Attracting Both Hunters and Mountaineers

The Forest Resource at Risk From Fire - Long Term Implications

The spring (April 4) of 1922 sees the Prince George district forester (P.S. Bonney) returning from an exploration of the McGregor River (now partly in the McGregor Model Forest). The purpose of the trip was to correct existing maps and make a rough estimate of the timber in that area. The timber is found to be more suitable for pulp than sawtimber (although today the timber in this area is considered good for lumber production and pulp wood). He found that in the upper reaches of the McGregor, the best timber was confined to river benches and was of limited extent. He indicated that all of this timber could be driven down the river to pulp mills below the mouth of the McGregor River (which were not built until the early 1960's). These early estimates of timber volumes were critical in the sale of timber by the province to private enterprises.

An article early in 1922 indicated that idle forest land in the Prince George area must grow timber because the exhaustion of the timber supply was predicted to be coming about. The problem was described in terms of an enormous area of

forest land, which has been logged and/or burned, was producing little or no timber volume because of the lack of regeneration. The report indicated that forest lands were not needed for agriculture but must be kept at work growing timber. Another article stated that the forest heritage was a precarious asset (considering wildfire) since mills were being destroyed, settlers' improvements were being swallowed up in flames, and billions of board feet of timber had been killed by fire started in many cases by careless use of matches.

It was estimated that the upper Fraser valley had twenty billion board feet of pulp and sawmill timber waiting for development but forest fires could come in a flash and start at numerous points. Lumbering operations in the upper Fraser valley were cutting on a very narrow margin of profit and the lumberman was entitled to long-term profits because of their investment like placing costly machinery in the woods. There had been no time for systematic protection of the mill properties. It was recommended that the timber resources in the province should come under a separate department in the B.C. Government. In 1920, unemployment was rife and the forest industry could assist in helping this situation.

The Sawmill Industry Continues to Expand - Giscome Mill (Largest to Date in District) Re-Opens

The big Giscome mill had been idle for five years, but was scheduled to open again in the summer of 1922. The mill opened up with one band saw running which put out 50,000 board feet on one Saturday. The mill was reported to be operating with a minimum of labor. Two other mills were ready to cut lumber at Foreman and Aleza Lake. In addition, the Frost mill started to operate and J. D. McArthur was reported to have bought a site for a big sawmill on Hudson's Bay Land.

A Call for More Organized Fire Protection and Controls on Fire Use

Newspaper editorials indicated that the summer weather could be severe and produce a significant danger from forest fires. In the past two years the development of the forest industry should have automatically brought into being a proper system of forest fire protection, especially if a pulp industry started to develop. The article indicated that it was up to the government to properly protect the timber, as well as, the heritage aspects. Forest fires were reported as an ever-present danger to the timber resources in the Prince George district. During the bad fire years, the air was full of the smoke and the sun was obscured. The author expressed concern that the railway right-of-way at certain points was being fired by gangs of men armed with permits to burn even though the sun was emerging impatiently from the obscurity of a very backward spring season, and had plunged the land into a strong summer heat, reinforced by

rather dangerous winds. The Citizen editorial went on to state that the timber will never be protected until a general development of the forest resources had begun, and this won't happen until pulp milling had started.

The 1922 Fire Season and Some Exciting Escapes From Burning

On May 30, 1922 it was reported that a banker (T. Ogg) and mill owner (B. Briscoe) had an exciting fire experience by making a dash through a forest fire west of Prince George. They had no trouble with the outward trip to the fire but a shift in wind direction drove the fire across the roadway and they were forced to negotiate about a quarter of a mile of burning brush. The car suffered damage, as well as, both individuals received burns on their faces.

At this same time, the Citizen reported several forest fires were blazing in the district. Mills and stations along the line of G.T.P. were in danger in some spots because of fires across the Fraser river. Fires were being fanned by a considerable wind. Fires were burning at Shelly, Willow River, Newlands, Otway, Six Mill Creek on the P.G.E., near the Northern Construction Company's camp, and right in the Cache in Prince George. The fire at Shelly was the most dangerous reported with the station of the G.T.P. and the Shelly Lumber Company's mill in danger of destruction, together with pre-emptions (cleared farm lands) and scattered dwellings. The fires had jumped distances of a hundred metres in places.

A week later, Mr. Briscoe, who escaped a previous forest fire, had his mill burn down. A change in wind direction suddenly swept the fire down a gully at the base of a valley where the mill was situated. It was impossible to save it.

On June 13, 1922, it was reported that fires in all directions had created a heavy smoke pall over the Prince George area. The Mud river fire had spread steadily from the burning of slash in the ranching section of the valley and had destroyed timber held by the J.D. McArthur Company. Every man available was called out to fight the fire. One of the principal employees of the McArthur company said that the fire had killed more timber than logging operations could remove over a long time period. The Buckhorn Lake fire was endangering thirty-two timber licenses and fires in the foothills west of the Prince George were still burning. In the Mud river valley, a Mr. Andy Miller had his big hay barn destroyed and settlers' families were standing by their homes and outbuildings. It was reported that many of the fires were burning old slash from logging operations, as well as, young timber. The absence of rain was having a "bad effect" in regard to these fires.

By June 16, 1922, the headlines reported that forest fires were wreaking havoc with remote timber specifically mentioning the area at the headwaters of the

Parsnip river, along with the Willow River area already mentioned. It was reported that a cyclone swept through the trees prior to one of these fires which left them piled in a swath. This was then reported as producing a ready-made fire trap because of the increased fuel loading. This was a very early reference to the relationship of fire behavior to fuels and also the need for fuels management to assist in fire suppression.

Prosecution of People Who Had Started the Forest Fires

The Forestry Department was reported to be pressing charges against criminally careless people who had contributed to destruction of timber by setting forest fires. "Human carelessness", said District Forester Bonney was the cause ascribed by his department to the fires burning in the Prince George district. Fires had been started by people who did not even have burning permits, and with the abnormal spring, which had delayed action on the hot weather, brought the danger season to the head in only a few days. Fires had been set by farmers who were anxious to clear up deadfall, who did not realize the hazard they took in doing this. Fanned by a very high wind from the northwest the flames advanced rapidly.

Swept by the strong wind from the northwest, one of these fires raced toward Prince George, and a crew of men was kept busy keeping the blaze to the timber on the far side of the Nechako river and stopping it at the borders of the Fort George townsite. This fire mounted into the hills beyond the Fort George townsite and menaced the Keegan timber limits. It was reported that slight rain fell on the Sunday night, coupled with the dropping of the wind which saved the seriousness of the situation. The worst fire, located near Shelly had killed trees which contained about two million board feet of timber, but was suitable for savage logging if removed within a year or so.

A recent fire in that section had done damage in the scene of operations of the Foreman Lumber Company. After traveling eleven kilometres or so, it jumped the Fraser and raced through the timber in a high or "crown" fire and destroyed six camps owned by the Foreman company. The sawmill and logs were saved by a big crew of fire fighters who went up by special train. During the high winds the fire threw masses of flaming pine needles, and even branches into the air which found their way across the flooded Fraser and descended in a shower about the old Magoffin construction camp. Another bad fire destroyed a splendid stand of timber over an area with a diameter of 16-20 kilometres, in the Castle river area. In the Mud river district crews were fighting a fire that had spread about 16 kilometres. The fire was started through the carelessness of settlers.

The Forestry Department was conducting prosecutions against numerous settlers for contravention of the Forest Act. People had burned slash without a permit or had left their campfires burning. Individuals such as M. J. Hair of Giscome, A. Hubbard of Giscome, L. Askren of Willow River, Fred Sherbacon and J. Malguane, Mud River were among those that were brought to court. Mr. C. Pabst of Giscome had set seven fires in his garden to keep the frost off and these fires had spread over only an acre of ground, and his case was dismissed.

In the August 1 issue of the Citizen, a careless camper was fined \$25 in McBride for building a campfire contrary to the regulation prescribed by the provincial forest board (i.e. material must be cleared away for three feet from the edge of the camp fire and totally extinguished before leaving). This fine is very small in comparison to the amount of funds required to suppress these fires in 1922.

The Final Stages of the 1922 Fire Season - Rains Did Stop the Fires Immediately

One good deluge of rain in the "Forest Fire" districts would be worth a couple of million dollars, reported the Citizen, indicating that a rainmaker could make good money. Long deferred rains were visiting the district (as reported in July 11 issue of Citizen) with beneficial results with the Forest Department reporting that all timber fires were under control. Fire fighting crews had been reduced to patrols and were predicted to be able to keep the fire situation in hand until the last blaze had been extinguished.

On July 17, 1922, it was reported that telegraph lines were in the grips of the elements and the Citizen was without telegraphic news because of the forest fires. By the July 28 issue of the Citizen, it was reported that the fire menace was again a very serious thing. Some mills were shut down near the city with the fires west of Prince George burning anew with additional danger near Smithers. The fire danger was reported as still very bad, owing to the lack of rain which in turn was causing low water levels in the creeks making the water supply for fire-fighting purposes inadequate.

On August 1, the Citizen reported that since the first of the year a total of \$1,150,323 had been spent for fire fighting in the province of British Columbia. Also on this date, it was reported that a metal plane was forced back by dense smoke at a point near Bear Lake, about seventy miles north-west of Hazelton. The plane was carrying about a ton and a-half of freight at the time. It was also reported that all telegraph wires were down between Doreen and Pacific (eleven kilometres of the government telegraph lines) being destroyed in forest fires near Forestdale.

It was also reported that forest fires had destroyed a lot of wildlife such as grouse and deer. The Game Conservation Board was to consider the problem

with the usual open season possibly being restricted. An open meeting was going to be held to receive recommendations regarding game protection and conservation. The P. G. E. railway was reported as attracting both hunters and mountaineers to the Prince George area.

By August 8, 1922 rainstorms were reported to have brought relief to the forest fire situation. There were no further reports of forest fires after this date in the Prince George Citizen. The B.C. Forest Service annual report indicated that in the Prince George area there was 151,000 ha that were burned by wildfires.

A Fire Fighting Idea From Giscome - Ahead of His Time

An ex-pilot officer of the R.A.F. submitted to the Minister of Lands some practical ideas regarding fighting fire using airplanes. The pilot was from Giscome, although his name is not mentioned. His ideas included using planes for aerial surveys and detection, as well as, the movement of equipment and personnel to fires (both were adopted very quickly by B.C. fire fighters). What was very much before his time was the suggestion of suspending below the fuselage a tank which could be rapidly filled with five tons of water (using a float plane). He estimated that if there was a lake (to pick up water from) within eight kilometres of the fire, then six trips an hour could be made bringing up to thirty tons of water to the fire. He admitted that it would not be suitable for large intense fires but could be effective on smaller fires just after ignition, especially in remote areas where access was a problem for initial attack. The first use (I found in the examined newspaper articles) of an airtanker in the Prince George area was reported in the Citizen in 1958, thirty-four years later. The B.C. Forest Service annual report for 1958 (p. 63) reported that "For the first time in British Columbia, free dropping of water was used extensively in combating forest fires. Previously, water bombing using water in bags had been tried on lightning strikes with little success."

Relatively Quiet Fire Years of 1924-6 and 1933

Headlines

Year 1924

August 14 Most Hazardous Times In History Of The District

Year 1925

- April 16 Protection Week For The Forest Begins Sunday*
May 14 Forest Fires Otway
New Settlers Take Lands on New Highway
McBride Bridge Duly Opened
Hutton Sawmill Was Completely Destroyed
Efficient Preventative Measures Are keeping Down Fire Losses
- May 21 Fire Near Giscome Was Brought Under Control on Tuesday Afternoon*

Year 1926

- May 13 Forest Fires In This District Required Early Attention This Year*
May 20 Sunday's Rain Put an End to the Big Miworth Fire

Year 1933

- June 22 Prospectors Are Active In McLeod River District*

The Fires Of 1924

These years were relatively quiet in terms of forest fires, although some significant ones happened in the Prince George area in 1924. The Citizen on August 14, 1924 reported a number of significant fires in the areas of Punchaw Lake, Chief Lake, Ness Lake, Willow River (started by a house fire spreading to the timber), Foreman (started by children playing with a piece of fuse), Nichol, and the north side of the Nechako River near Miworth.

Rain was needed to prevent a great loss of the forest wealth in the Prince George area. It was reported that conditions were right for conflagration to sweep through the district because the rainfall had not exceeded half an hour in duration with very little precipitation falling. Added to heat, a large factor in the rapid spread of fire, is the relative humidity in the atmosphere, which had dropped as low as 17%. It was reported that in the past two weeks there had not been any more hazardous weather conditions in the district since records had been kept. The total burned area for the Prince George district was reported by the B.C. Forest Service as 45,000 ha which was a third of what was burned in 1922.

The Fires Of 1925 - Fire Prevention Efforts Start to Take Off

On April 16, the Citizen reported that Protection Week for the forest began on Sunday with the District Rangers of Forest Branch making presentations to schools in their territories. Crossword puzzles and rulers (with fire prevention messages) were introduced to stimulate the interest of the children in fire prevention. These were the days before Smokey the Bear. Mr. J. M. Gibson, District Forester, had started a systematic effort to make an impression upon local residents of the importance of forest protection against fire. In fact, local Church pastors were asked to give sermons during their services to encourage cooperation on fire protection. April 19 - 25 was designated as "Fire Protection Week" to help show the importance of the forest in the development of the district especially after so many years of extensive forest fires. This was the first reference found in the Citizen that referred to these kinds of fire prevention efforts. No doubt the fire losses in the last few years had provided the push for getting this message out to the public.

An article in the Citizen from Victoria indicated that efficient fire prevention measures were keeping down the fire losses in the province. The number of forest fires as of May 14 was reported as 64, compared to 95 in 1923, and 128 in 1924. However, by the end of the fire season a total of 81,200 ha would be reported burned in the Prince George district, which was about half of that burned in 1922.

The Hutton Sawmill was reported as being destroyed by fire, although company employees prevented the fire from spreading to the planing mills and lumberyard. The many sawmills in the area continued to suffer fire losses.

Fire Near Giscome Threatens Sawmill and Town

The Citizen on May 21 reported that there was a fire near Giscome which was brought under control on Tuesday afternoon. It started on Monday morning in old logging slash about two kilometres southeast of Giscome and ran about five kilometres. Mr. J. M. Gibson, District Forester had a crew of one hundred men fighting it. This fire was mapped on an old Sinclair Mills fire atlas and showed it ran almost the full length of Eaglet lake and caused some concerns that it might run all the way to the newly established research forest at Aleza lake (John Revel, Prince George, 1995, personal communications). There were also a couple of smaller fires in late June in this year near the Aleza lake research forest which might also have caused some concern. The logging slash that had accumulated in this area south of Eaglet Lake had caused some concerns to the managers of Aleza lake research forest. In 1947, a strip was slashburned on the western edge of the forest to prevent wildfire from moving into the forest

(John Revel, Prince George, 1995, personal communications). This was considered one of the first prescribed burns in the Prince George area.

The mill at Giscome was running with a double shift of 150 men in the mill and 100 in the bush. This sawmill was listed in 1926 as the largest sawmill in the British Empire (John Revel, Prince George, 1995, personal communications). A fire, which was reported burning across the Fraser River from Woodpecker, was not considered likely to do much damage, with 26 men working to check the fire.

The Fires of 1933 - No Citizen Articles but a Fire Near Giscome

The Citizen did not report any fires during 1933. A B.C. Forest Service fire report did indicate a lightning-caused fire at the northwest end of Eaglet lake that burned from Aug. 13 to Sept. 6. This fire occurred during the hottest part of the summer with temperature ranging from 29 -31 °C. It covered an area of 1000 ha burning mainly in old logging slash. Mr. J.K. Frost provided an interesting silvicultural note at the end of the fire report. He indicated that the fire burned down to mineral soil and that it was a good seed year for spruce in the district. He suggested that Research Branch in the B.C. Forest Service be contacted so that in a few years time the area could be examined to see if a “catch” of spruce had taken place.

On June 22 prospectors were reported active in the McLeod river district in search of a local source of gold brought in by 1st Nations people. These kind of activities could also be an ignition source for fires in the Prince George area. The demand for lumber was reported as becoming stronger on the prairies and local logging operations were warned in an article to prepare for it.

The Big Giscome Fire of 1938 - Threatens Town and Sawmill

Headlines

<i>May 12</i>	<i>Forest Fires Held in Check Along C.N.R.</i>
<i>May 26</i>	<i>Big Bush Fire Raging East Of Prince George</i>
<i>June 2</i>	<i>Forestry Fire Danger Eliminated By Rain</i>
<i>June 16</i>	<i>Forest Fires Cause Drop In Timber Scale</i>
<i>June 23</i>	<i>Big Timber Fire In Peace River</i>
<i>July 7</i>	<i>Monkman Pass Road Makers Near Kinuseo</i>
<i>July 28</i>	<i>Forest Fire Raging Over 100 Square Miles</i>

The Fire Season Starts Slow

The fire season started with a few fires along the C.N.R. railway line towards McBride. One fire was started from a chimney fire, which ignited the house and in turn started a forest fire near Sinclair mills. The seasonal rain that had been occurring at that time was greatly appreciated by the local forestry officials. The Citizen on May 12 reported that twelve forest fires were burning in the province with nine centered in the Kamloops and Prince George forest districts. One at Giscome occurred right on the edge of the Eagle Lake Spruce Lumber Co.'s timber supply, and necessitated a force of fire fighters being sent to the scene, although rain put an end to the danger of the fire spreading into merchantable timber.

The Giscome Fire Threatens Community and Sawmill

The B.C. Forest Service fire report (fire #64) for the big Giscome fire indicated that it was person-caused and started in 10-year-old logging slash (from logging around 1928) north of Giscome on May 21, 1938. The fire was already 65 ha when initial attack started on the morning of May 22. Also the temperatures were high and relative humidity low with light northwest winds. By May 23, the fire had grown to 1600 ha with a fire front of 6 km. The fire was crowning in standing timber, although most of the burned area was in old logging slash. The fire was under control by June 2 with a final fire size of 6000 ha.

The first report in the Citizen was on May 26 (because the paper was a weekly publication). It was reported on May 25 that a change in wind direction turned the fire away from the Giscome mill when it was within a couple of kilometres of the settlement. The fire was being fought hardest in a section of merchantable Englemann spruce. The paper reported that there was no immediate danger to the towns of Giscome, Newlands or Aleza Lake. There were 180 men fighting the fires, which included all the mill crews. The Giscome mill was had a temporary closure in order to place every available man on the fire line.

The Danger Passes

On June 2, 1938, the Citizen reported that heavy rains on Sunday eradicated all danger from all the fires that swept the Giscome and Newlands district the previous week. The farm of Tommy Thomas was burnt out and the fire came within two hundred metres of the home of Roy Spurr, owner of the sawmill. Also, a group of nine men were trapped in one section of the fire narrowly escaping

death, as the flames enveloped them. Charles Damery of Giscome effected a heroic rescue by battling through the wall of flames and leading the men to safety.

Fires Affect Timber Production

On June 16, the Citizen reported that the forest fires had caused a drop in the Timber Scale in the Prince George area. This was because all the mills and camps were closed to allow their personnel to fight fires. As a result the sawlog production and all other timber classifications showed a drop except the production of ties, which was reported as up 8000 pieces over April of the previous year. The use of forest industry workers to fight fire in these early years was logical for several reasons: their immediate timber supply was in constant danger of being lost to fire, the companies owned equipment which could be used for fire fighting, and some of the worker's homes were in danger of being lost to fire. There was a lack of personnel employed by the Forest Department to fully staff up for fire fighting during extreme fire conditions. Articles also reported the use of local town's people, although they were not as trained, physically fit, and motivated as the forest industry workers. Today the forest industry plays a more minor role in fire suppression except for initial attack responsibilities on their own timber license holdings on private lands.

Other Fires in 1938 in the Prince George District

There were also other fires that were occurring during this year with a big timber fire in the Peace river area reported in the June 23 Citizen. A number of fires had joined up to create one raging fire. At this time, a crew of 14 were keeping a close watch on the Giscome fire because continued dry weather had made conditions extremely hazardous. Also, fires in the Monkman Pass area were responsible for 7 mills burning and great losses of timber. On July 28 a forest fire was reported in the Beaver River area east of McBride which was burning over an area of 260 square kilometres going from the river valley to 2400 metres in elevation. The fire was reported to be started by lightning on July 16. A total of 70 men were fighting this fire.

The fires of 1942 - The War Years

Headlines

*April 23 McBride-Monroe Mill Building Razed by Fire Saturday
Fire Damage*

- May 7 *Fire Destroys Sawmill on Giscome Road
 Flames Damage Pile of Lumber at Caine's Mill
 Mills Here May Cut Million Feet In 1942 Season
 Extinguish Grass, Chimney Fire
 Pineview-...Farmers are continuing to burn their clover*
- May 28 *Asks Everyone To Help Guard Forests of B.C.*
- June 18 *B. C. Forest Service*
- July 9 *Relief Sent To Burned Out Residents of Mill Town
 Lightning Fires In Hills Being closely Watched
 Further Warning Concerning Fire In B. C. Forests*
- July 16 *District Forest Fire Brought Under Control; Crews Busy Mopping Up*
- July 23 *Control Fires In District
 Ad: Help Stop the Beast Of The Pacific - Prevent Forest Fires*
- July 30 *Man Fined For Failing to Report For Fire Duty*
- August 6 *Fire South of Hansard*
- August 13 *Winds Fan Bush Fires In District
 Ad: Forest Defense National Defense Prevent Forest Fires
 Hansard - Millmen Fight Fire
 McBride - Recruiting All Available Men for District Rangers
 Giscome - Fires Burning East of Village
 Dome Creek - More Fires Due to Local Storms
 Holding Fires In District
 Hansard - Millmen Return From Fire Lines*
- August 27 *Fire Crews Are Called In When Danger Wanes
 Chief Lake - ...extinguishing a small brush fire
 Woodpecker - River Is Too Warm For Fish
 Dome Creek - ...forest fire in...Clearwater district*
- Sept. 3 *Suspect Fires Will Be...
 Expect Fires To Be Licked This Weekend*
- Sept. 10 *Dome Creek - Lightning set...fires...Dome Creek*
- Sept. 17 *August Forest Fires Upset Month's Production Report*

A Fire Season During the War

The fire season started in 1942 on May 7 when the Citizen reported that a fire had destroyed a sawmill on Giscome Road owned by Oscar Nordeen and Hjalmar Sjokvist. A fire spread from some adjacent brush during the night and started the mill on fire. The mill could not be seen from the logging camp so the loss was not learned of until the next morning when workers found only the charred remains of the mill. Lightning caused several more fires in the Dome Creek area which was reported on May 28.

The Fire Prevention Message Emphasizes the War Enemy

The fire prevention message continued to be put out to the public emphasizing the need for everyone to help guard the forests of B.C. and to consider themselves part of an army of firefighters who were actually in the firing line every hour of the day. The prevention message also stressed the urgent need to protect the timber resource because it was a valuable source of supply for the war industries of Canada. On September 10, 1942 the Citizen reported that Canadian lumberjacks were going to star in an Canadian Army Film called "Wood For War". Also an advertisement in the Citizen (displayed below) was entitled "*Help Stop The Beast Of The Pacific - Prevent Forest Fires*" which emphasized this theme of wood supply needs of the army and also the possible danger of the enemy starting forest fires as part of their fighting efforts. An article indicated that It was patriotic to be careful with fire.

On July 9 a further article on fire prevention went even further describing the dangers the war were bringing. The forest resources of B.C. were open to attack from the air or from the activities of saboteurs and it was a simple matter to leave a wet phosphorus paper hiding in some remote part of British Columbia's fine stands of timber, there to dry out and burst into flames. They thought that it would be easy for enemy aircraft to drop incendiary bombs, starting conflagrations which would destroy valuable stands, causing the closing down of mills and the withdrawal of manpower from important industries to fight the flames. In spite of these calls for helping to fight fire for the war effort, there were still reports of people being fined for refusing to fight fires, such as Dan MacNeil, who was sentenced by Magistrate P. J. Moran to pay a fine of \$25 and \$1.75 costs or serve 25 days. He took the jail term but indicated that was unable to work when he was summoned.

The B.C. Forest Service Is Praised and Working Quietly For All

On June 18, there was an interesting article about the British Columbia Forest Service which "works quietly but well". The author indicated that the public knows little of the long-range steps for the replacement of the virgin timber. It listed reasons like better logging methods, more care of the ground after logging more action against fire, and the preservation of seed stock as helping to "husband the store". In addition, the article indicated that the Province had established a conservation policy and was sticking to it with intelligent patience in these difficult years. Countering charges that British Columbia was wasting its timber resource, the article expressed the idea that this was less true today than it once might have been.

The Fire Season Starts to Take Off In August

On August 6 there were reports of a fire south of Hansard. There were also fires reported at Purden Lake, Penny, Parsnip River, Two Head Mountain and down the Blackwater River. On August 13, fires in the McBride district at Rearguard and Cottonwood river were now under control, along with a fire at Dore River. The Penny district had several new lightning strikes. The fire south of Purden Lake, to the south of Hansard, was now confined by fire guards and some of the crew were flown out and sawmill workers returned to their mills unless a serious hazard developed again in the next 24 hours. The fires near the Parsnip and Finlay rivers were burning strong. The fire on Two Head Mountain, east of Mud River, escaped early on Tuesday and additional men were put on the fire line to control the spread. Settlers had trouble holding permit fires on Tuesday evening when westerly winds made control difficult. There was mention of supplies for the more remote fires successfully being dropped in by parachutes.

On August 13, Upper Fraser Spruce Mills Camp 13 was shut down temporarily and the crew was taken to fight the forest fire at Purden Lake. Also, a large force of men were fighting fires near Giscome, but felt they would soon be brought under control. Lightning storms had caused several more fires in Dome Creek district, while the old blazes continued to burn despite the efforts of fire fighters. By August 20, the prospects were brighter for some fire fighters while one crew was forced back 10 kilometres by a fire and lost some of their supplies.

The dry weather had caused a number of smaller streams in the district to go dry and small trout were dying for the lack of water. High water temperatures in the Fraser River were being blamed by fishery experts for killing a large number of salmon on their way to spawning grounds.

On Sept. 3, a small crew was reported to have remained at Averil Creek, east of Summit Lake until the middle of the following week. This was one of the key fires available in the McGregor model forest that was used to determine succession after fire in the SBSvk subzone. The fire report indicated that two companies of soldiers were used to fight this fire. The burned only 400 ha but was very difficult to fight since 6.5 kilometres of trapper trail needed improvement and 8 kilometres of new trail was constructed just to get to the fire. Over half of the burned area resulted from a crown fire due to high winds on Aug. 13. Soldiers also strengthened fire-fighting crews on the Purden Lake fire.

The Fires of 1958 - Overwhelming Fires and Calls for Royal Commission on Forest Fire Problem

Headlines

- April 30 First 1958 Forest Fire
Forest Crews Curb Blaze Seen From P.G.*
- May 16 Fires Sweep 1,800 Acres Of Forest*
- May 21 Army Of Men Fight Fires
Drought Threatens District Farmland*
- May 22 Ten New Forest Fires Break Out Overnight
Forest Fires Are The Big Game Animal's Boon To Life*
- May 23 Smoke From Nukko Lake Casts Pall Over City
Plume Of Smoke Tells Tale
Men Conscripted; Hazard Critical*
- May 27 Fire Fighters Winning Battle
Front-Line Conditions Aren't Always Tough
Fire Closes Three Logging Operations (Vancouver)*
- May 28 Forest Fire Battle Less Serious, Under Control
No Outside Burning Now*
- May 30 Fire Mop-Ups to Start Soon*
- June 2 15 Firefighters Face 30,000 Blazing Acres
Fined For Not Fighting Fires*
- June 3 Huge Blaze Threatens Mill
Inferno Besieges Sawmill
Fire Fighting Costs Double Budget*
- June 4 Fires Threaten Forests Again*
- June 6 Worst Dry Spell Ruining Crops
Tourists Scared By Fires Here*
- June 9 Nine New Fires Break Out Here On Weekend*
- June 11 Scattered Showers Don't Help Forests, Farms*
- June 13 Rain Doesn't Affect Fires*
- June 16 Weekend Showers Help Subdue Forest Fires*
- June 23 Local Crops Almost Wiped Out By Blistering Sun And Drought
(Timber Stands Affected Too)
Eight New Fires Located*
- June 24 Forest Fires Rage In Two Provinces*
- June 25 Wind Whips Fires - Another Ten Started
Mercury Hits 93; Little Rain Seen*
- June 26 Fire Costs Now Up to \$1,500,000
Royal commission Urged On Forest Fire Problem
Rain Reduces Fire Threat In The Vancouver District*

*June 27 Sure, It's Cool But They Say It won't Last
 Firefighters Find Relief In Showers*
June 30 "Million Dollar" Rain Beats Fires
*July 2 Forest Fires Mopped Up
 Support Growing For Forest Fire Inquiry*
July 4 Hope For Some Crops Seen
July 7 Forest Fires
July 8 Forest Fires
July 10 Forest Fires Flicker Out
July 11 Fires Creep Toward Record
July 15 Drought Not So Severe As Feared
July 16 Cost of Good Weather Staggering
July 17 Smoke Causes Scenic Shut-Out For Princess
July 21 Fires In district Shatter All Records
July 22 Gale Force Winds Lash Fires Into New fury
*July 23 Forest Fires Spreading
 A Record We Did Not Want*
July 24 \$7 Million Go Up In Smoke
*July 25 Fires Over Million Acres
 Dry Weather Aids Work On P.G.-Quesnel Road
 Rain Badly Needed To Save Local Crops
 Forest Fires Seriously Threaten Timber Yield*
*July 29 Helicopters Used Against Fires
 Forest Management Licences Studied*
*July 30 Fire Threatens Firefighters
 New Weapon Against Fires*
*July 31 Weather Men Report Driest-Ever July
 A New fire-Bomb Technique Tried
 Firefighters on the ground...*
*August 1 New Equipment to Fight Forest Fires
 Forest Closure Hits Coast Oil Exploration
 Lightning-Laced Clouds Bring More Fire Trouble*
*August 4 Rain Was Only Slight But Most Welcome!
 Terrorists Blamed (Forest Blaze)*
*August 5 Parched Pastures ...
 Fresh Rain Showers Lower Fire Hazard*
*August 6 Fires Investigation To Be Held Here
 Fire-Fighter Hurt, Bear Attacks Farmer
 Emergency Fire Restrictions Off
 Fire Investigation Here*
August 7 Big Improvement Seen In Forest Fire Fighting
August 8 Dire Need Seen For Fire Research
*August 11 Fire-Fighting Complaints
 Logging Operations Resume In Once-parched Forests*
August 12 Forest Fires are disappearing...

*24 Hours - And Not A Fire Report
Fire Hazard Is Reduced*

August 13 *Fire Hazard Increases*
August 14 *450 Firefighters*

*Politics Heats Up at the Same Time Prince George Forest Industry is
Recognized as Vital to B.C. Economy*

The fire year of 1958 started off with trouble in the government and forest industry. During April, the Citizen reported that Robert E. Sommers, former B.C. Minister of Lands and Forests, was charged with conspiring to accept bribes from several individuals and firms and a number of individuals and firms were indicted with offering bribes to Sommers. The paper also reported that Hon. R. G. Williston, Minister of Lands and Forests, claimed that he and the government had made a determined attempt to curtail blackmail in connection with timber sales, but "the task is going to be a difficult one as long as human nature remains what it is." Along with this political heat that was starting, the fire season was to add additional problems, as the Ministry of Land and Forests started to deal with one of the worst fire seasons on record.

At this same time, the forest industry in the Prince George area was drawing the attention of the whole province, because this area had the greatest available source of white spruce in North America, was a new market for cottonwood due to a plywood plant in Quesnel, and was experiencing the comeback of birch because of its use in fabricating moulded plywood boats. Access roads were being developed to assist in protecting young forests and to make more timber available. Second growth timber was being thinned at considerable expense to increase the timber yield and people were planting seedlings. The Prince George Forest District was reported to support some 500 planing and sawmills in the immediate Prince George area, where approximately 5,000 employees earned \$17,000,000 and turned out lumber valued at \$35,000,000 annually. Lodgepole pine, vital for building power transmission lines, pilings, and railroad ties was available in the area with a demand for pine from Eastern Ontario possibly sending up the local price of lodgepole pine.

An Early Start To the Fire Season - April Fires

The fire season started early with the first fire reported on April 30. The fire was visible from Prince George and threatened merchantable timber and a sawmill 16 miles south of the city. The fire was quickly brought under control in spite of billowing smoke and intense heat. It was at the site of a clean-up project at Bernhardt Sawmills, five kilometres east of the highway. Meanwhile, crews were

reported to be cleaning up a series of blazes which broke out in the Fort Fraser area, 113 kilometres west of Prince George over the weekend with all being brought under control. The early start to the fire season was reported as unusual for northern B.C when surface soil is wet and moisture is in the woods. Prince George temperatures during April averaged almost two degrees Celsius above normal and were the warmest since 1949. Precipitation, too, was reported to be below normal, although snowfall had been average for the winter. The first thunderstorm of the year in this part of B.C. was noted on April 17.

By May 16 the headlines reported "*Fires Sweep 1,800 Acres Of Forest (Forest Hazard Reported to Be Worst In Years)*". There were reports of 22 forest fires in the Prince George forest district with the most serious blaze covering 80 ha 24 kilometres east of McBride. Most of the fires had occurred in logging slash, but some had been burning in valuable timber. Fire season was only two weeks old but already the Forest Service registered the highest number of fires of any area in the province. The initial outbreak of fires was blamed on dry weather conditions combined with an influx of campers and hunters. By May 20, the B.C. Forest Service officials had cracked down on all burning permits including a ban on campfires. On May 21 a new fire was reported near Albreda (between Kamloops and Jasper) burning immature timber in a very steep terrain. The fire hazard in the Prince George district reached its peak every spring, but this year the problem was aggravated by large areas of slash and heavy underbrush in the district (note that the use of prescribed burning of logging slash did not take off in a big way until the late 1960's).

Drought was also threatening the Prince George district farmlands with the Salmon Valley and Pineview areas being noted as parched. On May 22 ten new forest fires were reported with one raging about 50 kilometres south of Prince George, in the vicinity of West Lake. At this early point, 370 men and 24 cats and two aircraft were fighting day and night. The fire near McBride was now 400 ha but reported as under control. The 200 ha blaze at Albreda was still burning. The immediate causes of the fires were camper's fires, burning cigarette butts, open burners at lumber mills with the latter cause believed to be responsible for some of the worst fires. Firefighters were being recruited mainly from lumber workers in the bush (paid 70 cents an hour and called as needed) although recruitment had also been carried out through the Unemployment Insurance Commission. As well, in emergencies men were picked up where they could be found - from beer parlors or off street corners if necessary.

Positive Aspects of Forest Fires Mentioned by Chief Game Biologist but Countered by Arguments for Continued Fire Suppression

On May 22, the headlines read "*Forest Fires Are the Big Game Animal's Boon to Life*". Dr. James Hatter, chief game biologist for the British Columbia government

at the provincial game department, stated that without fires, hunters would have fewer animals to shoot because soft vegetation which grows abundantly on burned-out areas was the main food for the deer family, and that antlered animals eat little coniferous bush. One animal that suffers with fire is the caribou, which feeds largely on the moss which grows about tree trunks in cool, shady forests. These positive statements about the beneficial effects of fire were countered with other statements supporting the continued suppression of fires and the role logging plays in replacing fire as a cycling agent.

B.C.'s timber was reported as far more valuable than its game animals. The article reported that any cleared spot would eventually produce the wanted second growth without the use of fire. Rail and highway right-of-ways which stretch perhaps 20 or 30 yards were reported as providing "some of the best feeding places there are". Before 1900, only an occasional moose was seen but in the next 40 years moose moved into 150,000 square miles of new territory as it followed the virgin food supply areas created by man. The article reported that the game department had not practiced controlled burning because it had not been necessary.

The Fire Season Continues With More Fires and Close to Prince George

On May 23 smoke from a fire at Nukko Lake cast a pall over Prince George. Over 29 almost rainless days, was described as "critical," by district forester W. C. "Cy" Phillips. Other fires were the 240 ha blaze at West Lake, 240 ha fire at Chief Lake and one near Tacheeda Lake off the Hart Highway. Two Pacific Western Airlines (PWA) aircraft were engaged in the fire-fighting effort transporting men and equipment from the South Fort George seaplane base to the scenes of blazes throughout the district. On May 27, there were reports of 1700 men, tractors, aircraft and helicopters being used to fight against fires burning over 10,000 ha in central B.C. which were starting to pay dividends.

Northwest of Prince George, the huge Chief Lake fire, which covered 14,000 ha, was now reported under control and being mopped up. The Tacheeda Lake fire which broke out the previous weekend, 80 kilometres north on the Hart Highway had been contained within a fire guard and was expected to stay within its 650 ha area. A fire spotted a few miles west of Wells was the scene of a hot fight by crews, as well as a blaze 32 kilometres north east of Quesnel in the Cottonwood area. A fire at the Bowron Lakes was being fought by some 100 men and was spreading over an area of 1200 ha. A new outbreak of this was reported in the Peace River area southwest of Gold Bar. A fire burning near Mount Averil was last reported to have covered 280 ha (this was near McGregor Model Forest). The Bowron Lakes fire had now covered an area of 900 ha. Parts of the fire 80 kilometres north of Prince George on the Hart highway were burning on top of snow and part of the fire-fighting supplies airlifted into the area were dozens of

pairs of snowshoes. By June 2, a major fire was reported raging through slash and timberland in the Lower Post area, near the B.C.-Yukon border, 800 kilometres north of Prince George.

The High Cost of Fire Fighting Becomes A Reality and Tourism Down

The cost of fighting forest fires to June of 1958 was reported as well over twice as much approved for the entire year by the provincial legislature. The provincial legislature approved a total expenditure of \$150,000 for forest fire fighting, although the forest service was assured of as much money as it requires in extinguishing the blazes. It is interesting to note that today expenditures of over \$50 million have occurred during severe fire seasons.

As of June 6, the dry spell had recorded fifty consecutive days without appreciable rain, resulting in the driest weather on record for this time of year, which was now threatening widespread destruction to forage crops in the district. In addition to the crop problems, the Citizen reported that tourists were being scared away by fires in the Prince George area. The number of tourists for the summer was considerably down compared to the previous year. This observation was based on a theory from Northern Ontario where, statistically fires were up and tourist visits were down.

Showers Did Not Help Much With the Fire Situation

On June 9 the biggest of the new fires was 113 kilometres north on the Hart Highway, in the vicinity of Firth Lake with an area of 12,000 ha. Fires that were being patrolled included the remnants of the Lincoln Mill blaze, the fire at Albreda, West Lake and Chief Lake fires. By June 11 scattered showers were reported but were doing little to relieve drought conditions which had built up after eight weeks of rainless weather. Again on June 13 widely scattered rain showers had given little assistance to hundreds of men battling 35 forest fires in the area. Although by June 16 showers promised to bring the serious fire situation under control. By June 23, the total area burned was reported as 100,000 ha. The fire in the Lower Post region, was now estimated to cover 32,480 ha and had cut communications and highway travel near the B.C.-Yukon border.

By June 25, vicious winds had lashed old forest fires into a new fury and lightning had started at least 10 new ones. Gusts of 80 km/h or more made the flames at McLeod, Davy and Averil Lakes jump their fire guard. Lightning started a rash of small fires between Quesnel and Hixon and also in the Peace River country. The temperature reached 34 °C which tied the high of 1942. A helicopter-transported team was reported to be fighting a fire at McGregor River

(just outside the McGregor Model Forest) and firefighters reached a blaze at Hixon Creek overland.

The Fire Season is Breaking Cost Records and Calls for Royal Commission

As of June 25, the total cost from forest fires had climbed to an estimated \$1,595,000 while last year's expenditure for the whole season was only \$65,000. The long-term forecast for the mid-June to mid-July period predicted high temperatures and low precipitation.

A Royal Commission was being suggested to deal with the forest fire problem. The Citizen indicated that there were many stories of a handful of men and a couple of bulldozers fighting a fire extending over "thousands of acres". The article went on to say that "if we think millions of dollars worth of standing timber is going to be saved by these tactics then surely our thinking has gone haywire somewhere". One charge that was made most frequently was that a great amount of food and materials was being needlessly wasted. The articles indicated that many questions needed answers and that it would be to the good of the forest industry as a whole if it were done publicly.

By June 30, heavy rain was reported to have provided a saving of several million dollars in fire damage and suppression costs and all fires in the district, with exception of the Lower Post fire, were in the mop-up stage. Agriculturist, Art Donald, indicated that the rains washed away the troubles of firefighters and farmers but they didn't help solve the problems of the district because the past eight weeks were the hottest and driest in the Prince George area since 1935. On July 8, the first sign of green underbrush developing in districts was reported and this growth was expected to prevent a critical fire hazard from building up again in the forests.

The total number of fires was reported as rapidly overtaking that of 1938, the record year to date with 302 fires. The cost of all the "good" weather was reported as staggering. Farming had been brought to its knees by the unusual weather of '58. An assessment of how critical the situation had been was reported to be a long time coming. The yield of forage crops had been cut in half and in some areas only a third of previous harvests was produced. On July 17, a thick blanket of smoke obscured Princess Margaret's view of northern B.C. The royal aircraft was not seen until it was on the runway because of the thick smoke.

When the Fire Problem Seemed Over the Winds Hit

On July 22, the Citizen reported that fires in the Prince George forest district were lashed into new fury by winds gusting up to 60 km/h. on the Monday. The 2,400 ha fire, 113 kilometres north on the Hart Highway, jumped its guard on the northern perimeter. A nearby fire, about ten kilometres from the highway, grew by 200 ha to 1,400 ha. Winds pinned aircraft to the ground. Although one way the strong winds had assisted fire-fighting operations was to dispersed the great pall of smoke over the district, which had caused fires to start and spread undetected.

The Citizen reported the forest fires this season as a "*Record We Did Not Want*". A sidelight to the whole situation was the question of the cost to the wildlife of the area. The paper indicated "How incongruous that fire, the original scourge of mankind, should still wield such awful power over our lives and our economy". At least \$6,000,000 worth of timber was reported as having gone up in smoke (a very conservative estimate). The long-term forecast predicted dry weather until mid-September with no ceiling being set on fire-fighting expenditures.

On July 25, the Citizen reported that the most serious blaze was in the Crooked River forest area north of Prince George near the Hart Highway. Winds blew a fire near McLeod Lake into a second fire and the combined blazes were now raging worse than ever. Tractors had chugged over 24 kilometres of "slash" road to reach the scene of another blaze in the Crooked River district. Eighty percent of all fire fighting money spent in the province had been poured into the Prince George district. In the Prince George district, there was one fire reported to be equal to the physical area of Switzerland. This fire in 1958 was probably the one reported now as the largest fire in B.C. to date. It was an escaped wildlife burn in the Kechika valley (northern part of the Prince George district) and was mapped at 225,920 ha (in 1981 by John Parminter, B.C. Ministry of Forests, Research Branch).

The Fires of 1961 - Grove Fire Visible From Prince George

Headlines

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| <i>May 1</i> | <i>Forest Fire Season Opens Here Today On Right Note - Hazard Is Low</i> |
| <i>May 8</i> | <i>13 Fires In Area To Date</i> |

May 16 *Huge PG Forest District To Be Reduced In Size*
 May 23 *Fire On 10-Mile Front Burning Out Of Control*
 May 24 *Heavy Rain Fails To Halt Big Fire*
 Helicopters Increase Fire-Fighting Efficiency
 May 26 *Four More Fires Start In District*
 May 29 *Weather Puts Stop To Fires*
 May 31 *Fire Situation Unchanged Today In Forests Here*
 June 1 *Cost of Fighting Fires Hits Record*
 June 2 *One Forest Fire Reported Overnight*
 Above-Average Sun Here In Month Of May
 June 5 *Planes Seeking Blazes*
 Hot Weather Poses Forest Threat
 June 6 *Planes Continue Search For Area Forest Fires*
 June 8 *Fire Costs Skyrocket*
 June 12 *Only 12 Fires Burning In PG Forest District*
 June 16 *Huge Forest Fire "Too Hot To Fight"*
 June 19 *Lightning Touches Off 43 New Fires In Area*
 June 20 *Unexpected Rain Aids Firefighters*
 June 21 *Warm Weather Ups Fire Threat*
 June 22 *Fire Total Stays Same In District*
 June 23 *Big Fire May Spread If Rain Doesn't Fall*
 June 26 *Crews To Be Reduced As Rain Drowns Fires*
 June 27 *Fire Costs Rise By Near \$40,000*
 June 30 *Fire Hazard Expected To Be Down Two Weeks*
 July 4 *Fire Costs Soar To Over \$136,000*
 July 5 *Drying Bush, Lightning Pose Threat of Blazes*
 Fire Destroys Northern B.C. Fishing Community
 July 10 *Forest Lookout Station Equipment to be Probed*
 Rain Kills Forest Fires
 Majority Of Fires In B.C. on PGE Right - of - Way
 July 12 *Hot Sun Pushing Fire Hazard Up*
 Fire Costs 10 Times Those Of Last Year
 Forest Fire Kills 2, Razes 2 Towns (Madeira, California)
 July 13 *Forest Service Prepares for Grim Weekend of Fires as Sun Beats*
 Down
 July 14 *Old Sol Pushes Mercury to 94*
 Fire Hazard Now High As Temperatures Climb
 July 17 *Forest Fire Threatens Tiny Northern Centre*
 July 18 *Danger To North Community Eases*
 July 19 *Aircraft Seeking 'Sleeper' Blazes In Forest District*
 July 20 *'Dozers Cut Path 10 Miles to Fire*
 July 21 *Rain Cools Off Forest District*
 July 24 *6 Fires Reported In Area*
 July 25 *Only One New Forest Blaze Found Monday*
 July 26 *Public Carelessness Blamed Today For Fires in Vancouver*

- July 27 *Forest Hazard Here Continues Dropping
Fire Costs Dwarf Those of 1961*
- July 28 *3 Fires Spotted Here; Hazard Stays Moderate
Fire Costs Reach \$15,000 For Week*
- August 1 *Fire Hazard Climbing Rapidly Under Blazing Sun in PG Forest
District
July Dry, Warm But No Record*
- August 3 *Crews Beefed-Up As Blaze Grows*
- August 4 *Blaze Threatens Mill Near Here*
- August 7 *Pictures of Grove Fire
Rain Said Only Hope Of Beating Big Fires
Mud Being Put On Area Blazes By Water-Bombers
Roads To Fire Closed To Cars
Conscription Not Needed; Volunteer Fighters Fill Bill
Record August Mercury Reading of 91 Recorded
'Miracle' Saves 15 Fire-Fighters
5,000 Men Fight Montana Blazes*
- August 8 *Blaze Advancing On Two Centres*
- August 9 *Pictures of Blaze
Fire Pretty, Dangerous*
- August 10 *Closure Invoked On Area Forests
Some Control Seen Possible
\$1,074 In Tools Taken Overnight
Restrictions Put On Throughout B.C. As Forest Fire Hazard Keeps
Rising
Not All Work Is On Fire Lines
30 Miles Of Fire Guard Not Enough*
- August 11 *Some Control Secured On Two Major Blazes
Russian Radio Jamming Forest Service Channel
Blackened Waste Is Fire's Legacy*
- August 14 *Forest Fire Threatens Empty Indian Village
Forest Fires At A Glance*
- August 15 *Fire-Fighting Credited With Decline In Jobless
Forest 'Explosive' After Lightning*
- August 16 *Major Fire Erupts At Francois Lake
Refusal To Fight Fires Brings 30 Days In Jail
Willow River News (...grass fire on the CNR...)*
- August 17 *Grove Fire Hops Guard*
- August 18 *Grove Fire Races South at 12 Mph.
Burns Lake Burns At CBC Report Of Fire Threat*
- August 21 *Fires Contained, Hazard 'Extreme'
P.G. Fire-Fighting Costs \$769,000
Pictures of Fire Crews
Water-Bomber Squadrons Urged*
- August 22 *New Spot Fires Trouble Harassed Forest Crews*

	<i>Put The Forces To Work</i>
	<i>P.G. Forest Fires Bigger Than Greater Vancouver</i>
<i>August 23</i>	<i>Driest August Just Days Away</i>
	<i>Lightning Sets 11 Spot Fires</i>
<i>August 24</i>	<i>Cooling Helps Fire Fighters</i>
	<i>Fall Fair Defies Fire-Fighting</i>
<i>August 25</i>	<i>Fire Guards Hold Despite Winds</i>
	<i>High Winds Fan Flames In Newfoundland Forest</i>
	<i>Nature To The Rescue</i>
	<i>Burns Lake Eyes Its Fire Closely</i>
<i>August 28</i>	<i>Forest Closure Lifted As Fire Menace Drops</i>
	<i>B.C. Fire Costs Hit \$2,591,000</i>
	<i>Two Convictions Under Fire Orders</i>
<i>August 29</i>	<i>Number Of Firefighters Reduced In Area By 400</i>
	<i>Record Number Of Bush Fires</i>
<i>August 30</i>	<i>Firefighters To Be Protected During Hunting Season</i>
	<i>Rain Helps Foresters But Stops City Paving</i>
	<i>Forest Fires Blamed For Small Fair Parade</i>
<i>Sept. 6</i>	<i>Foresters Survey Blackened Timber For Salvage Value</i>
	<i>Forest Fire Costs Reach \$3.53 Million</i>
<i>Sept. 11</i>	<i>\$40,000,000 Damage In 4,500 B.C. Fires</i>
<i>Sept. 18</i>	<i>Fire-Fighting Operators' Job, Williston Says</i>

General Background From the Fire Reports

The summer of 1961 was most remembered for the Grove fire, which was started by human carelessness on the afternoon of Aug. 2 at a location between Tabor and Buckhorn Lakes. The fire turned out to be the most expensive (up to that point in history) for the B.C. Forest Service. It was also quite visible from Prince George and the Prince George airport throughout the month of August reaching a size of 22,000 ha. During this period a second fire ("TSUS") was burning a few miles to the east which reached a size of 14,000 ha.

Although the fire was less than 1 ha in size at initial attack on Aug. 2, it grew to 142 ha by 8:00am on the 3rd. By the evening of the 3rd, the fire had grown to 1000 ha because of a freshening westerly wind during the evening of the 3rd. The fire weather conditions during 1961 were not as severe as in 1958, although they were sufficient to produce extreme fire behavior.

The Start of the Fire Season - Slow and Normal

The Citizen reported on May 1 that the forest fire season had opened on a right note, that the fire hazard was low, in fact snow fell a day later. It was emphasised that forest service crews were still on alert because of all the open burning going on. Also the permit system for burning was being strictly enforced within and outside the city of Prince George. By May 8, there were still only 13 fires in the Prince George district, with most of them caused by sawdust piles which had burned through the winter. On May 16, the paper announced a reduction in the size of the Prince George forest district to help distribute the fire load to the Prince Rupert district.

The season was heating up a bit by May 23, when a fire with a 16 km front was reported burning out of control in the Peace river area, totalling about 9400 ha at that point. This fire near Stewart Lake (64 km west of Dawson Creek) was not stopped by rains on the 24th. Many of the fires in this area (total of 100 fires in district) were caused by the burning of rangelands, which occurs in the spring.

Helicopters Are Featured As Increasing Fire Fighting Efficiency

An article on May 24 featured the use of helicopters for fire fighting. The Prince George district was one of only five in the province to have a contract helicopter for use in fire fighting because of pleas by the district staff. The Bell helicopters could transport a two-person crew to a fire quickly. A Hiller 12E helicopter from Okanagan Helicopters also joined the effort in the Prince George area. A Super Cub plane was found to be very useful in fire detection with over 50 percent of fires reported by them in the Prince George district. Key tool and fuel caches were an important part of using this new technology. Rain and cool weather reported on May 29 brought all fire within the district under control. By the end of May, the Citizen was reporting that the cost of fighting fire had hit a record for this time of year, mainly because of the fires in the Peace river area.

June and July Have Only Moderate Conditions with Hazard Up and Down

By June 16, there was a significant fire reported southwest of Quesnel at the headwaters of Baker creek. On June 19, 43 lightning-caused fires were reported from a storm. Twenty-six of these were in the Penny area. Many of them were put out by rains that accompanied the lightning. On July 14, the maximum temperature in Prince George was 34 °C. During this time, parts of the prairies were recording the worst drought since the 1930's. A fire was reported on July 17 in the Citizen that was threatening Fort Ware. On July 19, a number of aircraft are being used to find "sleeper" fires (i.e. those that holdover after

lightning by smouldering in the snags and forest floor material) which could become major fires if conditions remained dry. On July 20, the Citizen reported that dozers had cut 16 kilometres of fire line to the "TSUS" fire, which had started a few days previous. The TSUS fire was reported under control on July 21 but would flare up again in August.

The Grove Fire Starts and Spreads Quickly - The Fire-Fighting Period

On August 1, a Citizen article reported that the fire hazard was climbing rapidly under the blazing sun without a break in site. The B.C. Forest Service feared another outbreak of fires was possible. The paper also reported that July was dry and warm but did not set any records. The August 2 Citizen microfilm was missing so an initial report of the start of the Grove fire could not be found. On Aug. 3, the Citizen reported that the fire was 400 ha. It was started from a spark from a chainsaw. The fire was visible from the city with a smoke column to 3,000 metres. The fire was being fanned by high winds. The fire was initially reported as burning in slash and second-growth spruce and pine timber. On Aug. 4, the Grove fire was threatening the Schlitt Bros. Sawmill. The fire could be seen as a red glow from Prince George and was reported as the most disastrous fire since those in the Summit lake area in 1958.

The Citizen on Aug. 7 featured pictures of three Avenger water-bombers which were dropping a mixture of water and bentonite (drillers' mud) from a height of 15 to 23 metres. Smoke was reported as being pushed to a height of 6000 metres. It was reported at a size of 14,000 ha, with 400 men, 30 bulldozers, and 4 water-bombers working on it. The TSUS fire was now reported at 12,000 ha. A police report indicated that it was a quiet weekend for arrests because the forest fires had taken most of the men from town. On Aug. 8, the residents of Giscome and Willow river were warned of possible evacuations if the fires moved closer than the current distance of 16 km. The fire was threatening a number of sawmills of which Six Mile Lake Sawmills was in the most immediate danger. Bill Kirschke, owner of Six Mile Lake Sawmill indicated that the year has been so dry that a creek nearby which has been running for 30 years has dried. He had also become one of the key fire fighters on the north side of the fire where it jumped the right-of-way for the new highway to McBride. The situation was severe enough that R.G. McKee, Deputy Minister of Lands and Forests and Floyd Nelson, B.C. Forest Service Protection Officer were brought in from Victoria. The Grove fire had already completely destroyed the Tabor creek sawmill.

The Grove fire was described in an article on Aug. 9 as beautiful, even pretty, to watch from a distance but for those people being affected by the fire it is an ugly monster and an enemy. The forest industry in the Prince George area and especially near the Grove fire, were playing a major role in the fire fighting

activities since they have both men and equipment to supply. Also their wood supply for their sawmills was in danger of going up in smoke. The Citizen also mentioned the unsung hero's of the fire fighting, the women at the Six Mile Lake sawmill. They were feeding 190 men, three times a day. They had to do this with facilities designed to feed 12 men not 190. The only reward they got was an occasional "This is sure good" or "Could I please have some more?". The article mentioned that this was enough for them.

The Citizen announced on Aug. 10 that a forest closure was invoked for the Prince George district with all campfire permits suspended and industrial operations stopped between 1:00 pm and midnight. The TSUS fire was reported as destroying more timber (300 million board feet) than the Summit lake fire of 1958. Most of the people fighting the fire (1642 to date) had been getting only 4 hours of sleep and some had none for several days during the emergency periods. There was 48 km of fire line built on the Grove fire to date, which at times had proved not able to hold the fire. To add to the difficulty of fighting the fire, a Russian radio broadcast had jammed one of the B.C. Forest Service channels. The Russians had increased their propaganda and power output because of the space flight accomplishments that had recently occurred.

A Description of the Burns - How Do They Look When the Fire Has Stopped?

An article on August 11 portrayed the Grove fire as an "ugly calling card, a blackened waste". The description of the aftermath of the Grove fire on Tabor mountain described the earth as "scorched down to sub-soil, with its colour as grim and lifeless". The trees were described as "gaunt, shrivelled remainders of what once were stately trees sticking forlornly into the air or leaning exhausted against each other". The fire was compared to "death having ravaged the land like a plague". The article did mention that there were areas where the fire did not burn which remained green. The fireguards were also mentioned as "reminders of man's futile efforts against the raging inferno."

Still Not Out of the Woods on the Fires of 1961

By Aug. 14, a fire was reported to be threatening the First Nations village of Ingenika, although dense smoke did not allow the B.C. Forest Service to determine how close it was to the community. The B.C. Forest Service was concerned that all available bulldozers in the Prince George area were in use and some were starting to break down. Lightning storms on the evening of Aug. 14 had fire fighters concerned if some escaped initial attack. The Grove fire had jumped fireguards on the east side on Aug. 17. On Aug. 18, north winds pushed the fire south at a rate-of-spread estimated at 19 km/h. Local communities like Burns lake were concerned over a CBC report that described their situation as

serious with only a fireguard separating them from a fire. The report had caused tourists to cancel their reservations. There were also rumours in southern B.C. (not part of the CBC report) that tourists coming north were being conscripted to fight forest fires. The Citizen made it clear that this was not the case.

A Call for Help in the Future From the RCAF

The Citizen reported on Aug. 21, that the Prince George Chamber of Commerce passed a resolution calling on the Canadian government to form a squadron of air tankers using the RCAF. They also asked that federal funds being used to build more roads for better fire access. The paper also reported that Ray Williston, Lands and Forests Minister and Finiay (sic) McKinnon, Chief Forester flew over the Grove fire in an helicopter. On Aug. 22, the Prince George fires were described as being bigger than greater Vancouver. On Aug. 23, the Citizen reported that August was shaping up to be the driest on record since 1933. On Aug. 25, the Lap fire was mentioned as burning in the area of kilometre 800 on the Alaska highway which was five times the size of the Grove fire (122,000 ha).

Cooler Weather Brings Relief Finally to the Prince George District

Cool weather reported on Aug. 28 helped to lift the forest closure for part of the Prince George district. Hunters were being stopped at check points to ensure the safety of the remaining 872 men on the fire lines. No shooting was being allowed in or near burned areas. The Grove and TSUS fires remained within their boundaries. B.C.'s total fire fighting costs hit \$3,530,000 of which half had been spent in the Prince George district. Foresters in the Prince George district started to survey the blackened timber from the 1961 fires for possible salvage by the forest industry. The forest industry could get the wood for half of the stumpage normally charged. The Citizen paper on Sept. 11 reported a total of 4500 fires and \$40 million in damage in 1961. A B.C. Forest Service spokesman stated that "the bulk of our experience on forest fire fighting has accumulated in the past four or five years, but it will be a while yet before we have all the money, equipment, and trained personnel to do the job we'd like". In terms of fire fighting in the far north of the district, the spokesman indicated that until the forest industry started utilising more of the timber in the area, the forest service could not justify the high fire fighting costs.

Could Things Have Been Improved?

The last article about the Grove and other fires in the Prince George district appeared on September 18. It reported that Ray Williston, Minister of Lands and

Forests, in a speech to the annual meeting of the Associated Boards of Trade of North-Central B.C., said that the first responsibility of forest fire fighting rests with the forest operator. Air tankers would only be sent after the operator has made an attempt to put the fire out and needs help. This was in response to suggestions that water bombing in the early stages might have prevented some fire from spreading. He went on to say that “the people of B.C. owe a sincere debt of gratitude to the men of the forest service for their outstanding work in this matter”.

Fire-Fighting Changes Since 1961

A discussion of all the changes in fire fighting since 1961 would involve enough material to write another report. There has been many changes just in the fire fighting equipment, in terms of helicopters (bigger, faster, and carry water for bombing) and air tankers (bigger, faster, and carry more than water like foam and long-term retardant), and initial attack crews (like rapattack that repel out of a helicopter). Technologies such as lightning strike detection using sensors throughout B.C., and resource-tracking capability using Global Positioning Systems and computers are just a few changes. Fire fighting decision support tools on the computer have put fire and weather information at the fingertips of the fire mangers, along with computer programs that help make decisions on fire fighting techniques and priorities. The development and release, by the Canadian Forest Service, of the Canadian Forest Fire Danger Rating System in the 1970's and the more recent introduction of the Canadian Fire Behavior Prediction System in 1992 have improved fire management decision making.

Trained 20-person crews that can be moved around the province as needed, other fire-fighting resources (such as planes and helicopters) that are more mobile, and the exchange of fire-fighting resources among other provinces and the U.S. (not very frequent) have all helped deal more effectively with the fire problem in B.C.

Probably the most, dramatic change in fire fighting is that we no longer call this kind of activity “fire control” but “fire management”. This means factors like the land management objectives, possible positive aspects of fire in ecosystems, cost/benefit of fire suppression are now being considered in deciding the fire suppression effort that should be undertaken on a particular fire. Protected areas like parks are being managed to allow, where possible, fire to play a more natural role in the park ecosystems. This change to fire management also means that fire will be considered in the overall forest management planning process.

It would be interesting to look at the Prince George Citizen to see how these changes have been reported over the years. Also there has been a few more

significant fire years (not in McGregor Model Forest) in the Prince George district since 1961. The years 1971, 1982, and 1985 proved to be a challenge for the B.C. Ministry of Forests Protection Branch. The fire prevention message has probably not changed a lot in this time except in getting the new message out about the positive role of fire. The role of the forest industry in the fire fighting operations has changed. They do not get as involved in the large fire fighting operations, although they still have some limited initial attack roles. The B.C. Ministry of Forests protection crews are no longer gathered from the unemployment centres or conscripted from people on the streets since a minimum level of fire suppression training is now recognised as needed and required.

Fires will continue to challenge fire-fighting efforts in the Prince George area in the years ahead. Multiple lightning and person-caused fires that occur during extreme fire weather conditions can spread quickly, taxing even the best-prepared fire organisation. Putting our fire fighting efforts into the highest priority areas and attacking the fires when they are still small will continue to be the goal in future improvements to fire management in the north.