



"Children-With-Matches" Fires in the Angeles National Forest Area

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ABSTRACT: Forest fires started by children playing with matches pose a threat to the Angeles National Forest. An investigation of the problem has gathered some data on the characteristics of the offenders, appraised existing organizational structures and procedures for dealing with the problem, and recommended some action to improve the situation.

The University of Southern California has recently completed a preliminary analysis of the threat posed to the Angeles National Forest by children playing with matches.¹ This study was done under the terms of a cooperative agreement with the Pacific Southwest Forest

and Range Experiment Station. It is part of the fire prevention research supported jointly by the Station and the California Division of Forestry.

The Angeles National Forest, where this study centered, exemplifies the growing management problem presented by increased population density. In addition to the increased use within the forest, residential development from surrounding communities extends to the fringes of National Forest lands. Plentiful, highly combustible fuels and a wide range of ignition sources have resulted in an extremely high fire hazard. As has been dramatically indicated during the past few years, each fire is potentially a major disaster not only in terms of loss of protective watershed cover, but also in terms of destruction of high-value property and loss of life.

Scope of the Problem

The University researchers were concerned with determining the scope of the problem; the governmental jurisdictions involved; investigative and recording procedures used; and inter- and intra-agency coordination problems.

They had difficulty in assessing the representative incidence of fires caused by children with matches (CWM fires) because no central file was maintained on such fires, or even fires in general, occurring in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. Even within jurisdictions, the reporting and record retrieval systems in most instances prohibited making a comprehensive analysis of these fires.

¹This note represents a summary of the University's report to the Station: *Children with matches fires in the Angeles National Forest and adjacent jurisdictions: A preliminary analysis*. Admin. Dyn. Res. Proj., Sch. Public Admin., Univ. Southern Calif., Los Angeles, July 1965, 53 pp. The original report is on file at the Pacific SW. Forest & Range Exp. Sta., Berkeley, Calif.

Responsibility for handling the total fire problem posed by children with matches in the Angeles National Forest area is distributed among eleven municipalities, the County of Los Angeles, and the Forest Service. Each of these jurisdictions has its own fire prevention, fire suppression, investigative, reporting, and follow-up procedures. Responsibilities are frequently further dispersed among different agencies within given jurisdictions.

Every jurisdiction studied uses a different form for reporting fires. These differences are in terms of format, content, scope, emphasis, as well as size. The definition of a reportable fire also varies from one jurisdiction to another.

Investigative and follow-up procedures appeared to be quite informal, with rather broad latitude permitted the investigator.

Formal means of exchanging fire prevention information among agencies was limited. A variety of monthly and annual meetings was reported, but although frequent individual expressions of concern about the problem of CWM fires were made to the researchers, this problem had not been the subject for formal discussion at any of these meetings recently.

Data Collected

In spite of the difficulties in obtaining the records, sufficient data were obtained to demonstrate that children with matches are an important fire cause. The age distribution of children in 484 cases of CWM fires shows that very young children are involved, the highest incidence occurring in the 5- to 7-year-old category. About three-fourths of the fires attributed to juveniles were started by children 10 years of age or younger:

	<u>Percent of fire starts</u>
Age:	
Under 5	12
5 to 7	34
8 to 10	28
11 to 13	16
14 and over	10
	100

Most of the offenders are males (92 percent).

There was evidence from some of the municipal records to show that the proportion of fires caused by children is much higher for brush-type fires than for other types of fires.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although this study was confined to the Angeles National Forest area, there seems little question that foreseeable trends will intensify the problem of fires caused by children playing with matches throughout California and in other areas where urban population infiltrates brush-covered hills. There remains some question regarding the most effective steps to be taken to meet the problem.

From their analysis of the situation, the USC study group makes the following recommendations in their report to the Experiment Station:

- Whatever action is taken must start with the fact that although CWM fires as well as other types of fires do not recognize jurisdictional boundaries, efforts to deal with them are diffused through a wide array of governmental agencies.

- In view of the age distribution of children involved in fire incidents, fire prevention efforts should include consideration of pre-school and early elementary school children. Most children would appear to be beyond the stage of fire experimentation before they are reached by the public school conservation education program. It would seem necessary to develop programs aimed at the parents of such children. One District within the Angeles NF reported success with house-to-house contacts with parents in selected areas of critical risk. Very young children might be most effectively reached through the popular television programs produced for their age level. However, specially designed programs for use in nursery and kindergarten classes should also be considered.

- An inter-agency task force should be formed for further study of organizational and coordinational needs associated with the CWM problem. Subdivisions of the task force might be responsible for studying and making recommendations regarding: the desirability of a centralized records facility for the area; reporting procedures and criteria; investigative and follow-up procedures; benefits and limitations of standardization; evaluation of operational effectiveness of various programs in use by various agencies; development of a coordinated public education program; and a review of policies that have relevance to the problem.

Coordination, based upon complete and accurate information, is essential. The nature of the problem is such that mutual aid, long accepted in fire suppression, must be extended to fire prevention as well.

The Author

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