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FUEL-BREAK REPORT NO. 8

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A FIUEL-BREAK HAS BEEN TESTED

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Naturally, we prefer to start our reports with the successful use of the Glendora Ridge Fuel-Break. It was only partially completed at the time. Yet local fire bosses think this break already has shown some of the values of the fuel-break approach to management of chaparral watersheds.

The experience supports the fuel modification program conducted cooperatively by the California Division of Forestry, the Los Angeles County Fire Department, and the U. S. Forest Service in southern California.

THE FIRE

San Gabriel Valley residents didn't know that a fuel-break was about to be tested on July 8, 1962. But they knew another brush fire was off to a big start about 3:00 P.M., as signalled by a dense column of smoke. The fire had started just below Morris Dam at a location where four teen-age boys had been playing.

The fire was burning up a northwest-facing slope in a dense, tall, heavy cover of chamise, scrub oak, toyon, and other chaparral species. This cover had not been burned since 1919. It contained much dead fuel that had developed during drought years.

The day was not good -- moderately severe burning conditions prevailed. At nearby Glendora the air temperature was 95°F. and relative humidity was 26 per cent. Winds were about 8 to 12 miles per hour as the fire burned up Pine Canyon toward the ridgetop fuel-break. Carl Hanson, fire inspector for the U. S. Naval Testing Station at Morris Reservoir, said that winds were making whitecaps on the water, and management of a small boat was difficult.

District Ranger Anselmo Lewis stated that rate of spread of the fire was about average for such July conditions. But fire intensity probably was well above average. When the fire reached the fuel-break, in some places the flames were plainly visible to valley residents several miles away.

WHAT THE FUEL-BREAK DID

The extremely hot fire was held at the fuel-break. Three spot-fires started across narrow portions of the unfinished break, but they were quickly extinguished by crews who did not have to worry about "blowover" or "curlback" dangers which can be experienced while working on the back side of a narrow firebreak.

Men in charge of the fire were Keith E. Klinger, Chief of the Los Angeles County Fire Department, Los Angeles County Battalion Chiefs Ward Kleinsmith and Parker Haraden, and Ranger Lewis.

Chief Klinger said that without the fuel-break his men would have been fighting the fire inside the city limits of Glendora. The others agreed, and said the rate of spread might have increased if the fire had reached the drier south side above Glendora.

Fire bosses mentioned these advantages:

...The fuel-break greatly simplified fighting the fire. Men and equipment could be sent to the head of the fire; without the fuel-break, men wouldn't be placed on the ridge-top with the fire running at them.

...The fuel-break made possible early frontal attack, which contributed to reducing burned acreage.

...Many skilled fire fighters soon could be moved to pick up the flanks of the fire.

...The fire fighters' confidence that they were not in danger of being trapped was important in limiting the area burned.

...The fuel-break reduced traffic jams.

...Aerial tanker drops were very effective in the grass cover, the type of fuel that will dominate most fuel-breaks.

To sum up, the fuel-break added confidence and effectiveness to the fire-fighting effort. The break helped stop the fire, and it made possible the rapid dispersion of men and equipment needed to complete the backfiring operations.

The old Glendora Ridge fire-break, which was rather wide, is currently being widened to fuel-break standards by the Los Angeles County Fire Department and the Angeles National Forest. The standards require clearing brush from a strip at least 200 feet wide. Except for a narrow bare strip in the center, the future cover on the break will be grass or other low-growing vegetation. Where the fire hit the break, the cleared strip varied from about 100 to 200 feet in width. Even so, fire fighters were unanimous in crediting the uncompleted fuel-break with making their job easier and expediting overall control of the fire.

If you know of other examples in which Fuel-Breaks have paid off, please let us know.