

Commentary Note on Forest Fire

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Commentary

The most common hazard in forests is forest fire. Forest fires are as old as the forests themselves. They pose a threat not only to the forest wealth but also to the entire regime to fauna and flora seriously disturbing the bio-diversity and the ecology and environment of a region. During summer, when there is no rain for months, the forests become littered with dry senescent leaves and twigs, which could burst into flames ignited by the slightest spark. The Himalayan forests, particularly, Garhwal Himalayas have been burning regularly during the last few summers, with colossal loss of vegetation cover of that region. Forest fire causes imbalances in nature and endangers biodiversity by reducing faunal and floral wealth. Traditional methods of fire prevention are not proving effective and it is now essential to raise public awareness on the matter, particularly among those people who live close to or in forested areas.

Classification of Forest Fire

Forest fire can broadly be classified into three categories;

- Natural or controlled forest fire.
- Forest fires caused by heat generated in the litter and other biomes in summer through carelessness of people (human neglect) and
- Forest fires purposely caused by local inhabitants.

Types of Forest Fire

There are two types of forest fire Surface Fire and Crown Fire

Surface Fire-

A forest fire may burn primarily as a surface fire, spreading along the ground as the surface litter (senescent leaves and twigs and dry grasses on the forest floor and is engulfed by the spreading flames.

Crown Fire-

The other type of forest fire is a crown fire in which the crown of trees and shrubs burn, often sustained by a surface fire. A crown fire is particularly very dangerous in a coniferous forest because

resinous material given off burning logs burn furiously. On hill slopes, if the fire starts downhill, it spreads up fast as heated air adjacent to a slope tends to flow up the slope spreading flames along with it. If the fire starts uphill, there is less likelihood of it spreading downwards.

Effects of forest fires

Fires are a major cause of forest degradation and have wide ranging adverse ecological, economic and social impacts, including:

- loss of valuable timber resources
- degradation of catchment areas
- loss of biodiversity and extinction of plants and animals
- loss of wildlife habitat and depletion of wildlife
- loss of natural regeneration and reduction in forest cover
- global warming
- loss of carbon sink resource and increase in percentage of CO₂ in atmosphere
- change in the microclimate of the area with unhealthy living conditions
- soil erosion affecting productivity of soils and production
- ozone layer depletion
- health problems leading to diseases
- Loss of livelihood for tribal people and the rural poor, as approximately 300 million people are directly dependent upon collection of non-timber forest products from forest areas for their livelihood.

The needs of the fire management

The incidence of forest fires in the country is on the increase and more area is burned each year. The major cause of this failure is the piecemeal approach to the problem. Both the national focus and the technical resources required for sustaining a systematic forest fire management programme are lacking in the country. Important forest fire management elements like strategic fire centers, coordination among Ministries, funding, human resource development, fire

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research, fire management, and extension programmers are missing. Taking into consideration the serious nature of the problem, it is necessary to make some major improvements in the forest fire management strategy for the country. The Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, has prepared a National Master Plan for Forest Fire Control. This plan proposes to introduce a well-coordinated and integrated fire-management programmer that includes the following components:

- Prevention of human-caused fires through education and environmental modification. It will include silvicultural activities, engineering works, people participation, and education and enforcement. It is proposed that more emphasis be given to people participation through Joint Forest Fire Management for fire prevention.
- Prompt detection of fires through a well-coordinated

network of observation points, efficient ground patrolling, and communication networks. Remote sensing technology is to be given due importance in fire detection. For successful fire management and administration, a National Fire Danger Rating System and Fire Forecasting System are to be developed in the country.

- Fast initial attack measures.
- Vigorous follow up action.
- Introducing a forest fuel modification system at strategic points.
- Firefighting resources.

Each of the above components plays an important role in the success of the entire system of fire management. Special emphasis is to be given to research, training, and development