Welcome

to the Wildland Fire Edition of the *Natural Inquirer*!

One hundred years ago, forest fires roared across the Northern United States. Although fires burned in New England and upper Midwestern States, the fires of Montana, Idaho, and Washington State were by far the worst of that year. On 2 days in August 1910, much of northern Idaho and western Montana were ablaze. The fires of those 2 days are called "the Big Blowup" by foresters. The Big Blowup changed the way Americans viewed wildland fire. These fires also profoundly affected the Forest Service. Following the Big Blowup, fighting wildland fire became its chief mission for almost 75 years.

This edition of the *Natural Inquirer* focuses on wildland fire. Wildland fire has been defined as any fire occurring in vegetation areas regardless of how it was started. In this edition, you will learn about different types of wildland fires, including uncontrolled wildfires and fires purposely set and controlled by foresters to provide benefits to a natural area.

The fires of 1910 destroyed large areas of forest land.

Photo courtesy of Forest Service Northern Region Archives.

Every spring and summer, wildland fires are in the news. These news reports are usually about wildfires. Wildfires are large uncontrolled fires that could have been started by lightning or by careless people. Contrary to what you might think when you hear those reports, wildfires are not always a bad thing for a natural ecosystem. When wildland fires burn close to homes or businesses, or burn out of control, they become news because of the damage they might do to people, farms, livestock, or buildings. Some trees and animals, however, need occasional fire to survive. Wildland fires are a necessary part of some ecosystems. They have been the reason those ecosystems have survived.

In this edition of the *Natural Inquirer,* you will learn about the history of wildland fire in America. You will learn about the Big Blowup. You will learn that wildland fire is not simply bad or good. You will learn how foresters work to enhance the benefits and reduce the dangers of wildland fires. In this edition, you will read about some plants and animals that must experience occasional fire to survive.

In 2010, a century has passed since the Big Blowup. This *Natural Inquirer* was created so that you can learn about wildland fire and what scientists are discovering about it. Hopefully, the next time you hear about a wildland fire in the news, you will pay close attention to the story. You will remember how foresters work to protect people and buildings from wildfires, how they reduce the chance and impact of wildfires, and how they work to increase the benefits that society gains from occasional wildland fire.

Fire Research in the Forest Service

Almost 50 years after the Big Blowup, the Forest Service took action to better understand wildland fire's benefits, its dangers, and how fire should be managed. In 1959, the first laboratory devoted to forest fire research was opened in Macon, Georgia. The following year, the Forest Service established the Missoula, Montana, Fire Laboratory. In 1963, the agency opened the Pacific Southwest Forest Fire Laboratory in Riverside, California. The newest wildland fire research laboratory was opened in Seattle, Washington, in 2003. This lab, however, had been the home of fire research since 1973. In Madison, Wisconsin, scientists working at the Forest Products Laboratory search for better ways to protect wood products from fire damage.

An experiment at the Missoula, Montana, Fire Sciences Laboratory investigates how fire spreads. This fuel bed was composed of shredded wood hanging on wire stands. Fire could spread from one row of stands to the next only if flames contacted the shredded wood in the next row. Where the gaps between rows were too wide, the fire could not spread. Results like these provide clues about the importance of heat in how fires spread.

The scientists who work at these laboratories have contributed much to our understanding of wildland fire. They are helping Americans to understand that fire is a necessary and beneficial part of many ecosystems. They are developing better ways to protect people, homes, and businesses from wildland fire. They are improving the way we manage natural areas that may experience wildland fire. The research you will read about in this edition of the *Natural Inquirer* is just a small example of the many topics Forest Service scientists study to improve our understanding of wildland fire.