

THE ATTITUDE TOWARD FIRE.

One of the most serious obstacles to the practice of forestry by the lumber companies, and, therefore, to the satisfactory working out of any tax system designed to encourage timber growing is the absolute lack of popular appreciation of the damage wrought to a forest by fire and the callous disregard on the part of many settlers for the state's fire laws. As a result the fire damage throughout this whole region is simply enormous, and the injury to young growth which is usually not considered, is almost irreparable. A representative of one of the large lumber companies in Price county gave it as his opinion that in this county alone at least 20,000,000 board feet of lumber were annually ruined by fire. According to Mr. E. M. Griffith, State Forester of Wisconsin, the damage to mature timber and property from forest fires in 1908 amounted to fully \$9,000,000. Consequently a most adverse feature of this fire situation is that no individual or company can consider forestry methods or hope to obtain reproduction on cut-over land until some adequate system of fire control has been tried and its efficiency amply demonstrated. Very little success along this line can be expected until the state is willing to provide for a thorough fire patrol during all dangerously dry seasons.

As clearly pointed out in the report of the State Forester of Wisconsin for 1908, the present system of fire wardens, while good as far as it goes, falls far short of meeting the actual needs of the situation. Under this system the fire wardens are all local men, and it is not strange that in a great many instances they should fail to take legal action against a neighbor who may have been guilty of breaking the fire law. But the most serious defect in the present law is its failure to provide for fire patrol, which is the one great need of this whole region. The lumbermen so fully appreciate the urgency of such measures for prevention of fires that they are willing in many cases to form a fire protective association to be maintained by levying an annual assessment on an acreage basis from each member, and having as its primary object an extensive system of fire patrol. Such a patrol should not cost over 2 cents per acre per year, and could be placed directly under the State Fire Warden, by whom the individual local patrols could be appointed and made regular fire wardens. A patrol system of this kind should extend to the other parts of the towns as well as to the holdings of the associated lumber com-

panies, and the towns should be charged for patrol and fire-fighting service within their borders. At present it is left entirely to the discretion of the towns as to how much they shall pay for such services, whereas they should be compelled to settle all accounts for fire fighting or patrol submitted by the wardens and audited and approved by the State Fire Warden.

Another variation of this same plan may be suggested whereby the present town fire warden system should be maintained independently of the lumber companies' patrol, but working in harmony with it under co-operative agreement between the state and the association. In any case it is quite obvious that very limited results can be looked for from tax reform until the fire risk is largely eliminated through adequate legislation and effective enforcement of the same.

Attention has already been called to the fact that a large number of the companies interviewed declared that a satisfactory tax law with a deferred tax on the yield as its basic feature would influence them to hold certain portions of their lands for a second growth of timber. It would seem, however, decidedly unwise to place unqualified reliance on these seemingly favorable expressions of opinion. This means no reflection on the sincerity of such companies, but there is undoubtedly need of calling attention to certain difficulties. In the first place, it is far from certain what the lumber companies would agree on as a satisfactory law. There is, in fact, actual basis for a belief that certain of the forestry regulations which would be deemed essential to the successful administration of such a law would meet with the serious disfavor of many of the companies. Efforts already exerted on the part of the Wisconsin State Board of Forestry to secure the co-operation of the lumber companies in obtaining fire protection have in several instances met with considerable opposition wherever slash burning under careful supervision was insisted upon. It is extremely improbable that many lumber companies would desire to avail themselves of a deferred tax provision if it entailed a compliance with regulations that were distasteful to them.

Moreover, it is not at all improbable that a great many companies which at present believe that with a change in the tax system they would practice forestry, may gradually realize the seriousness of the objection brought forward by several of the largest lumber concerns of that section to the effect that forestry, because of its long-time features with the attendant risks, does not afford a sufficiently attractive investment to appeal to private capital. The views of one of

the large operators along this line were that although a tax on yield would undoubtedly be of distinct advantage in its effect on the conservation movement in general, and would most likely react favorably in influencing the future owners of the land to keep non-agricultural areas in timber, yet its effect on present-day lumbering operations would be scarcely noticeable. He believed it would be, for many years to come, financially advantageous for a lumberman to clean up his operations and dispose of his cut-over land as quickly as possible, and he was firmly of the opinion that it was the province of the state to have full control of absolute forest lands. Mr. A. E. James, Statistician of the Wisconsin Tax Commission, in pointing out how insufficient might be the relief afforded a lumberman by such a law because of this very limitation, cites the following example which well illustrates the unsatisfactory possibilities. "Where, say \$10,000 is to be raised, if the assessment is \$1,000,000, the rate will be 1 per cent. If \$100,000 of that million is agricultural and improved land and \$900,000 is forest land, the forest will obviously pay a tax of \$9,000. If we assume \$600,000 represents the value of the timber which it is proposed to exempt, the valuation of the town would be cut to \$400,000, of which \$300,000 would represent the (timber) land value exclusive of the timber. With the same amount of tax to be raised the rate would be $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent and the timberland would bear a tax of \$7,500." In other words, under the example assumed, the exemption of \$600,000 of timber would only result in the reduction of the tax by \$1,500. Any material tax on the timber when cut would undoubtedly very much more than make up for this difference and would ultimately result in heavier rather than lighter taxation of forests.

While this example fails to give due prominence to the effect of the income from the tax on yield in keeping down the tax rate, it certainly points out difficulties in the way of the adoption of such a law. Because of these difficulties in the successful administration of the law and more particularly because forestry is fundamentally a long time proposition extending through many years before returns may be expected, there is much to be said in favor of state control of all absolute forest land.