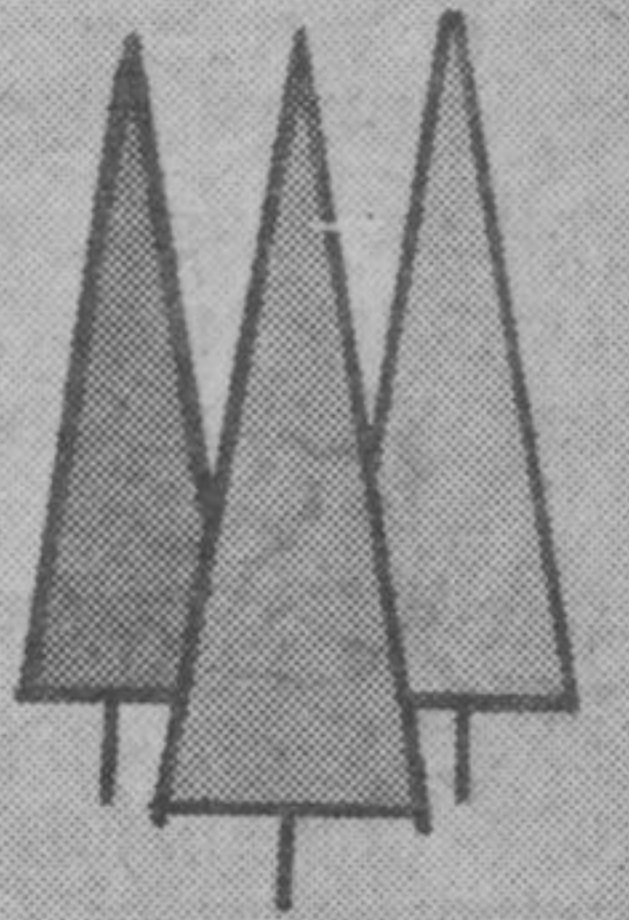


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EARLY FOREST FIRES THREATEN NORTHWEST

Faced with the earliest and potentially worst forest fire season in provincial history, Natural Resources Minister Frank S. Miller is asking everyone in drought-dry Northwestern Ontario to support and become involved in an expanded Ministry fire prevention program.

Already more than 60 "sleeper" fires are smoldering as deep as 10 feet into the dry forest floor under the snow, mainly in the areas west of Thunder Bay, around Atikokan, Fort Frances and Kenora, the Minister said.

Mr. Miller asked residents in the northwest to take cottage trash to dumps rather than burn it and to consider using gas or propane stoves or pack a thermos and sandwiches for outings.

"If an open fire is necessary, increase every effort to guarantee that the fire is dead out before leaving it," Mr. Miller advised winter recreationists.

Mr. Miller also asked northerners moving about in the bush to report to the nearest Ministry of Natural Resources office all fires they encounter and to warn visitors about the danger and seek their co-operation.

Dick Brady, fire management officer in Northwestern Region, said the "snow fires" began popping up during duck hunting season and have been steadily added to by cottagers burning trash, snowmobilers, ice fishermen and bushworkers lighting small lunch or warm-up fires.

"They use ordinary winter precautions to extinguish the fires," he said, "not realizing it takes many times that effort because under the snow we've got summer-dry fuel."

"Those fires smoldering away after people leave a site are like lit fuses leading into the next fire season," said the Minister of Natural Resources. "They're not an immediate serious threat to the forests until the snow goes, then they could suddenly flare up."

"Because of that and the severe drought conditions, our Forest Fire Control Branch won't be waiting 'til spring this year," he said. "They'll be 'doing it now'!"

A 20-month-long drought which has spread from Manitoba to west of Lake Nipigon and into the Sault Ste. Marie-to-Sudbury area has resulted in not only tinder-dry conditions and record low water levels, but all sorts of other problems for northerners.

"In whole areas of the northwest, streams, beaver ponds and rural wells are drying up," said Harold Redding, fire management officer for North Central Region, the area just west of Thunder Bay and north of Lake Superior.

For Natural Resources fire officials on the scene, the drought-watch brings grim visions of the fourth bad forest fire season in a row, possibly even worse than last year.

"We'll have to have a freak spring to even get us back to normal moisture levels," Brian Stocks said. "Based on more than 30 years of weather data at Kenora and Thunder Bay, the chance of recovering moisture losses prior to spring is extremely slim," Mr. Stocks said.