

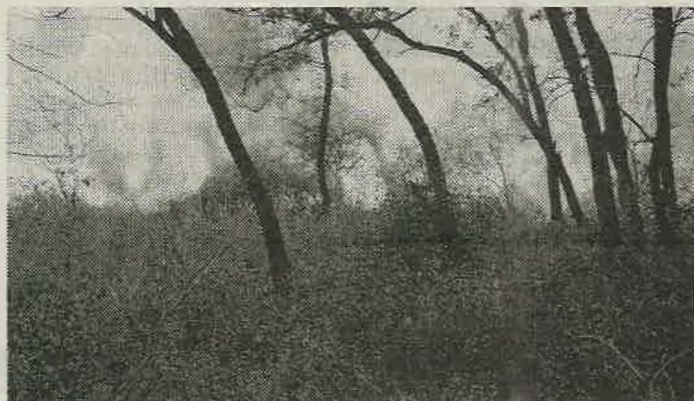
Long & dry spell triggers forest fires in Himachal

HARPREET BAJWA @ Chandigarh

BUT for Wednesday's paltry rain, the Queen of Hills—Shimla—could have been as parched as the plains down its mesmerizing slopes. Spread across seven hills in the northwest Himalayas, the tourist hub and its adjoining areas faced a long dry spell. This May and June have been particularly bad as the Queen groaned under rain deficiency of 73% in May and 67% in June until now.

Along with the longest spell of heatwave, Himachal Pradesh is grappling with severe forest fires: more than 2,100 cases have been reported this season, causing massive damage to more than 22,000-hectare land and harming the wildlife.

The temperatures in the hill state crossed 40 degrees Celsius many times this summer, leading to acute water shortage. So much so that Shimla's water supply is reduced to once every three days. The municipal corporation has banned all construction activities until June 30. MK Seth, president of the Shimla Hotels and Tourism Stakeholders Association said the water



crisis occurred due to the unprecedented heatwave and a prolonged dry spell, leading to the drying up of water sources.

State forest department sources citing data said the worst affected district in the state was Dharamshala; it recorded 475 instances of forest fires followed by Mandi with 300 cases, Hamirpur 250, Nahan over 200 and Solan around 200 instances. Shimla and Chamba accounted for 150 forest fire incidents.

There are 2,026 "forest beats" in the state out of which 339 are categorized as very sensitive, 667 as sensitive and 1,020 as less

prone to forest fires across the state. Out of the total forest area of 37,033 square km in the hill state, around 17.8% has chir-pine forests, which is highly sensitive to forest fires.

State's Principal Chief Conservator of Forests Rajiv Kumar said around 2,100 forest fires have been reported so far this year due to the rise in temperature. "The previous two years saw no major forest fires, which resulted in the accumulation of dried leaves. This leftover dried foliage becomes highly combustible when temperatures rise," he said.

Whipped by hot winds, Punjab forest scorched

HARPREET BAJWA @ Chandigarh

ONLY about 6% of Punjab's geographical area is covered under forest. However, this year, the state has recorded the third highest number of forest fires in a decade: the count is 273 and is likely to increase in the coming days. The state saw only 46 fire incidents in the previous year.

Forest department sources say that for the first time, big patches of forests have been gutted. Earlier fires covered only smaller areas.

According to data from the Punjab forest department, big forest fires took place in most of the Kandhi belt of the state bordering Himachal Pradesh. The biggest blaze was in Pathankot district where around 200 acres of forestland was damaged. The Siswan forest area covering SAS

Nagar district adjoining Chandigarh suffered substantial forest fire damage followed by Hoshiarpur, Garhshankar, Ropar and Gurdaspur districts. In Hoshiarpur, around 25 acres were damaged in sudden fire flare-ups.

State's principal chief conservator of forests RK Mishra said 273 forest fire incidents reported this year were due to extreme heatwave conditions. "For the first time, large areas of the forest caught fire in the state, which was not the case earlier," he said.

On Wednesday, a fire enveloped the Kathlour wildlife sanctuary in Pathankot, spread across 1867 acres near the Amritsar-Jammu bypass, and destroyed a significant part of the sanctuary that shelters several species of deer.



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