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Forests of the Soviet Union

by

MICK KREIDLER

The Soviet Union is a huge country that covers one-sixth of the world's land area. It contains 8,650,000 square miles compared to 3,567,000 square miles in the United States.

The timber reserves of the Soviet Union are equally as vast, roughly four times the area of the United States and five times the volume. About 28 percent of the world's forest area lies within the boundaries of the Soviet Union. It is estimated that 78 percent of those forests are in the Asiatic regions of the Soviet Union.

The forests are divided, by origin, into natural and planted forests. About 709.3 million hectares of natural forests are found there. Planted forests comprise an area of approximately 13 million hectares.

In terms of age, mature and over-mature stands predominate and account for 64 percent of the entire forest area. Other groups are maturing trees - 11.8 percent, middle-aged stands - 13.9 percent, and young trees - 10.3 percent.

Due to the higher northern latitudes of the major portion of the land mass, resulting in a shorter growing season, average annual growth for all productive forest areas in the Soviet Union (USSR) is 15.7 cubic feet per acre, compared to 29.2 cubic feet in the United States. However, total annual growth is 32 billion cubic feet per year compared with 14.2 billion cubic feet in U.S.

The major forest types of the Soviet Union extend in long parallel bands from east to west. The wooded tundra is the band farthest north and is comprised of birch, willow and aspen which is of little commercial value. The next band is the taiga which stretches from the Finnish border to the Pacific Ocean. It consists of the northern conifers spruce, fir, Siberian stone pine, Scotch pine and larch. Birch, aspen and alder are the accompanying hardwoods. South of the northern coniferous forests is the forested steppe area composed of oak, elm, ash, basswood, maple and Scotch pine.

The southern borders of the Soviet Union are primarily mountainous forests. The Caucasus region is the only area of economic importance in terms of forestry. At medium elevations of 3,000 to 5,000 feet elm, oak, Nordmann fir, Scotch pine, beech, ash, maple and walnut occur. A Mediterranean flora covers the foothills and lower slopes. This consists of chestnut, Aleppo pine, juniper and boxwood.

Central Asia contains desert forests with riparian areas of elm, willow, poplar and Russian olive.

The composition of Soviet forests is primarily coniferous. About 78 percent of the forest-covered area is coniferous species with larch the most widely distributed. It covers approximately 40 percent of the forest area with pine a distant second at 16 percent. Spruce, cedar and fir follow in order the two leading species. Birch is the major hardwood species comprising over nine percent of the forest-covered areas. Saksaul (Haloxylon) and aspen are second and third respectively.

The forests of the Soviet Union are under the direction of the Ministry of Agriculture and managed by the Department of Forest Industry (forest production) and the Department of Forests and Shelterbelts (forest management).

The Soviet Union's forests are divided into three groups according to their importance in the national economy. Group I consists of forest nurseries, soil and field-protecting areas and health resort forests, green zones around factories and plants, pine belt forests in western Siberia and steppe forest groups. Group I contains 6.5 percent of the forest-covered area of the USSR.

Group II is made up of forests with timber reserve conditions that demand a limitation in the extent of felling and an expansion of restoration work, and in densely-populated industrial sites. Group II comprises eight percent of forest-covered areas.

Group III contains forests in densely wooded areas, with large operating reserves of timber. These forests are located primarily in the northern taiga of the European and Siberian regions and the Far East. Group III is by far the largest group consisting of 85.5 percent of the operational forests in the Soviet Union.

The socialist state of the USSR recognizes the sanitary-hygienic and aesthetic roles of forests and has established a system of shelterbelts around many of its towns and cities. Over 4,600 population centers have green zones and forest-park belts with an area of over 11,500,000 hectares.

Goals of Soviet forestry are to increase production for the national economy and to provide areas of aesthetic and recreational value for its people.

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