

The high fire hazard which recurs annually in exotic forests and some indigenous forests demands an intensity of fire prevention and control organization which is not justified or necessary in other parts of the Dominion where a high hazard occurs only occasionally and then for only short periods. Consequently, the constitution of permanent fire districts is required only in the case of the former, while the latter can be effectively dealt with by existing County Councils, with power given to each County Council to declare fire-hazard areas within the district under its administration in which the lighting of fires is prohibited except with permission of the County Council's Fire Officer during the period of the restriction. Upon this principle, draft proposals for a Bill were assembled, and after the draft had been considered at several conferences of local authorities, forest owners, farmers and sawmilling industry organizations, fire underwriters and Government Departments, representatives of Fire Boards and fire brigades, and others, the proposals were adopted by the Government and passed into law during the 1947 session of Parliament as the Forest and Rural Fires Act, 1947.

The principal features of the Act may be summarized as follows :—

- (a) *Rural Fire Districts*.—For the purpose of securing the safety of trees, flax, and other plants, gum lands, sand-dune areas, and peat lands from damage by fire the Governor-General may, by Order in Council, declare any area to be a rural fire district and may declare a period to be a closed fire season during which it is unlawful for any person to light a fire except with the permission of a Rural Fire Officer.

Before such Order in Council is issued the Minister is required to advertise the proposals in a newspaper circulating in the locality and deposit a plan and notice setting out the proposals for public inspection, and any person affected is given one month in which to send to the Minister any well-grounded objection. Any objection is considered by the Minister or by some person appointed by him, and if it is not well grounded the Order in Council is issued.

A rural fire district is controlled by the Minister or by a Rural Fire Committee as the Fire Authority for the district. When a Rural Fire Committee is appointed it is the policy when farming and sawmilling interests are substantially affected to consider the appointment of representatives of those interests to the Committee. The Order in Council is required to specify the property for the protection of which the rural fire district is constituted. The expenses of a Fire Authority of a rural fire district may be met as agreed by the persons interested in the operations of the Fire Authority or by a levy on owners of land containing the property protected.

- (b) *Soil Conservation Districts*.—These are under the control of the Soil Conservation and Rivers Control Council, which is the Fire Authority for these districts.
- (c) *County Areas*.—Each County Council is the Fire Authority for the county area under its control, excluding rural fire districts, soil conservation districts, and State forests. The authority of County Councils was effective from 18th November, 1947, the date the Act became law. Many counties used the powers of the Act during the 1947–48 fire season and declared fire-hazard areas by notices in newspapers. A County Council is authorized to charge its expenditure to county accounts.
- (d) *Fire Authorities*.—The Commissioner of State Forests, Rural Fire Committees, the Soil Conservation and Rivers Control Council, and County Councils are Fire Authorities for their respective districts.

Under the Act every Fire Authority is required to take effective measures for the prevention and control of fires in the area under its control and is required to appoint one or more Rural Fire Officers and such other officers and employees as may be necessary. Fire Authorities of rural fire districts are given certain powers which do not apply to other Fire Authorities.