

Learning from history: fighting fire with fire Riviersonderend Fire

By Reinard Geldenhuys, chief fire officer, Overberg District Municipality



The terrain necessitated the preparation of a tracer line and subsequent back burn

on Fire and Volunteer Wildfire Services were deployed into the mountains and trying to contain the fire under very difficult terrain and wind conditions.

"Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it." Winston Churchill.....

The bulk of the fire was now on the southern slope above the farm Ganzekraal. This farm is extremely well prepared for fire both in equipment and firebreaks.

Right in the path of our fire's slow downslope march was a R14 000 000 plantation, well protected by indigenous forests with only two weak points where mountain fynbos extends down a ridge to the plantation.

One of the owners, Bernard Beyers, an extremely knowledgeable man, explained to us that there was a similar fire 20 years ago, also threatening the plantation with the same two exposures. The then Department of Forestry (Bosbou) prepared a tracer line across the two ridges from indigenous forest to indigenous forest, waited for the fire to come within fifty metres and did a back burn off the tracer line.

Looking at the terrain this tactics seem to make a lot of sense and the preparation of the one tracer belt of about three-metres wide made its

On the last day of winter, a lovely windless, balmy Sunday afternoon, the fire season in the Overberg kicked off. A fire started high up in the Riviersonderend Mountains, situated in the Overberg District Municipality in the Western Cape province of South Africa, beyond the reach of ground teams and posing no immediate threat to anyone.

Fire units were put on standby but no actions except monitoring the fire were taken. The fire burned slowly and without direction throughout the rest of Sunday and part of Monday. Only towards the evening of Monday, 1 September 2014, the first day of Spring, did the fire start taking

direction and started moving down the southern slope of the mountain.

By Tuesday morning, a short (smaller) incident management team consisting of officers from Overberg Fire and Cape Nature personnel was mobilised to assume command of the incident.

What would have been fairly simple tactics in fire season became a logistical challenge with a helicopter and spotter aircraft eventually flown in from Sutterheim towards the evening to assist in fire suppression activities.

By Wednesday, the incident management team was expanded and up to sixty fire fighters from Working



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The Emergency Care Institute of South Africa's DISMERT course



The University of Cape Town (UCT) and the Emergency Care Institute of South Africa offered a Disaster Medical Response Training (DISMERT) short course during October 2014. The practical module included a real-life scenario and camp was set up at approximately 17h00, practise went through the night until approximately 10h00 the following morning. Doctors, technical rescue

technicians, paramedics and canine search and rescue, amongst others, attended the course.

Fire and Rescue International spent an evening with the 20-odd students, which hailed from various countries and across many spheres of expertise. We were joined by Ken Terry, head of the National Disaster Management Centre (NDMC); Colin Deiner, chief

director, disaster management and fire brigade services, Western Cape Government and Reinard Geldenhuys, chief fire officer, Overberg District Municipality.

The course was presented by Dr Wayne Smith, head of disaster medicine, Division of Emergency Medicine (UCT/ SUN). Dr Smith has over 20 years of emergency medicine experience, which include

- way onto the objectives for the next operational period.

By Wednesday night, the tracer line on the eastern flank was prepared and with the fire now getting close teams remained on the line and lit it at 05h00 on Thursday morning, 4 September 2014.

Further actions by Beyers and his teams with more back burns in cooperation with the fire services saw the eastern threat to the plantation secured.

On Friday, focus shifted to the northern slope with actions to shorten the lines. On Saturday, we were joined by a Volunteer Wildfire Services with their work cut out for them leading the final assault on the eastern flank with the WoF team from Bredasdorp.

The western flank was now beginning to threaten the plantation again through the remaining fynbos ridge and the same tactics were followed building a tracer belt and burning it out.

By the Sunday afternoon the last of the fires on the Southern slopes were extinguished and by Wednesday, 10 October 2014, fairly heavy rain on the mountain around Riviersonderend took care of the remaining fire on the high ridges of the mountain.

Two weeks later, another two fires started near Barrydale due to lightning strikes, indicating that we might be in for an interesting 2014/15 fire season! ⚠