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FYNBOSFIRE

# FYNBOSFIRE IN THE NEWS

# Stark choice could save landowners millions

By Jo-Anne Smetherham

Landowners in rural areas face a stark choice regarding the danger of runaway wildfire.

They can ignore the risk it poses to their life and property – and those of their neighbours – or they can join the efforts to manage this risk, reducing it dramatically – and save themselves the costs of being sued for millions.

There is a sound model for managing the risk of wildfire, and a solid track record showing that this approach works.

A few years ago Dave Hodgson, a lucerne and cattle farmer in the Langkloof lost a pipeline and his fences in a fire ignited by lightning. "I would have lost much, much more, without the Fire Protection Association (FPA)," he says.

"Preventative measures were the most important thing. We had firebreaks in place, trained staff and a very well co-ordinated and distributed fire-fighting effort.

"Before the FPA existed, and people were properly trained, there were workers going off to fight fires in plastic raincoats. Prevention can't be stressed enough."

A large number of FPAs have been formed in rural areas across the country and on the urban edge, in compliance with the National Veld and Forest Fire Act of 1998. This law outlines the responsibilities of landowners regarding wildfire, the responsibilities of FPAs in managing fires and preventing unwanted fires, and the procedures they should follow when fires break out.

The Act states that any landowner on whose land a fire may start, or from which it may spread, must prepare and maintain firebreaks, and ensure that they have the equipment, protective clothing and trained people required to start fighting such fires.

If a fire spreads onto someone else's land, damaging his or her property, the owner of the land where the fire started is financially liable. Landowners who are not FPA members must prove their innocence at their own cost.

If you are an FPA member you are in a far better position, as it will be the claimant's responsibility to prove that you were negligent, at his own cost.

FPA membership can cost as little as a few hundred rand a year for private landowners, depending on the size of their property. This fee is well worth the measures that can be put in place to prevent fires from devastating their own properties and avert the large legal claims that could result should a fire start on their own land and spread.

Charl Du Plessis is manager of the Greater Cederberg FPA, which covers 98% of the West Coast municipality in the Western Cape, and manages the risk of wildfire over about two million hectare of land. The recent fires in the Cederberg mountains would not have been vanquished without the co-ordinated efforts of the Greater Cederberg FPA, he says.

The fires raged for weeks in inaccessible parts of the Cederberg, but the FPA prevented any damage to farmlands or infrastructure.

Like other large FPAs, the Greater Cederberg FPA is broken up into management units, to manage fires on a local level.

Another large and highly efficient FPA is the Southern Cape FPA, which covers four million hectares of land incorporating parts of the Western Cape and Eastern Cape. This FPA covers the Baviaanskloof, Langkloof and Tsitsikamma areas, and the whole of the Eden District municipal area.

Fire Protection Associations manage the risk of wildfire on the urban edge, as well as in rural areas. Philip Prins, manager of the Table Mountain National Park Fire Management Department, points out that all landowners on the urban edge of Cape Town are at risk of being overrun by wildfire.

However, the work of the Cape Peninsula FPA members - in prevention, spotting wildfires and alerting the Fire Protection Officer – regularly leads to the suppression of blazes that would otherwise threaten property. “We want all landowners on the urban edge to become part of our efforts,” Prins says.

There are now nine umbrella FPAs – one in each province – representing the interests of their members. A single national umbrella body, the National Veld Fire Management Advisory Forum (NVFMAF), was set up late last year to enable the provincial bodies to learn from each other, ensure that common standards are met and represent the FPAs in working with government.

The experts agree that Integrated Fire Management (IMF) is the best strategy for managing the risk of runaway wildfire, and the best-functioning FPAs have adopted IMF. This is a holistic series of actions that include fire prevention activities, including risk-reduction measures such as creating firebreaks and controlled burns; fire awareness activities; detection; dispatch and co-ordination; fire suppression and fire damage rehabilitation.

FPAs have proven their mettle; the challenge now is improving the efficacy of those that are not functioning well, and ensuring the financial sustainability of them all.

FPAs are funded largely through donations in kind, such as the use of members’ buildings and airstrips, and membership fees. For FPAs to grow substantially, they need help providing landowners with resources – from radios to “bakkie sakkies”, or water trucks – and the services of a fire extension officer, who explains the work of the FPA to prospective members and gives advice and assistance. The challenge is to increase the membership of each FPA to the point where this person’s salary is covered.

“It’s a catch-22 situation,” says Paul Gerber, chairman of the Southern Cape FPA. “We need to get more members, but to grow we need resources.”

The Fynbos Fire Project is providing FPAs in the fynbos biome with the resources to help them become self-sustaining in the long term. These resources include the salaries of extension officers. The project has many other aims for boosting FPAs in the fynbos biome, including aiding FPAs to adopt Integrated Fire Management, improving the quality of weather data and developing incentives to encourage behavioural change among landowners and communities at risk.

The project is a multi-million rand initiative between the South African Government, the United Nations Development Programme and the Global Environment Facility. The ultimate aim is to develop a fire-management model in the face of a changing climate that can be replicated across South Africa, and in other countries.

There is no doubt that FPAs could become self-sustaining, says Peter Dorrington, manager of the Western Cape Umbrella FPA and secretary to the national body.

“Some districts seem bound for failure, because the role players don’t seem to want to work together. But in others, it could definitely work,” he says.

“It needs very strict management, but we already have that. The way our FPAs are working together is extremely effective.”

The answer is to get every landowner who is legally responsible for fire management, to join the local FPA.

“We’re no longer looking for a fire management model that works. We already have one,” says Dorrington. “The programme really is set for success.”

- The GEF Fynbos Fire Project was established to support adaptation and technology transfer in all developing counties party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which has granted the project funding over three years. Cofunders of the project include the South African National Department of Environmental Affairs, through Working for Water and Working on Fire, the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (Western Cape), FPAs, the FFA Group of Companies and the United Nations Development Programme.

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