

Launch of the National Fire Danger Rating System
Media release by the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry
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The Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, Ms Buyelwa Sonjica, today, 7 September 2005, launched South Africa's National Fire Danger Rating System (NFDRS) in Cape Town in partnership with the South African Weather Services. This occasion marked the closing event for the Department's National Arbor Week, which is celebrated 1 - 7 September each year.

Minister Sonjica explained "the NFDRS is a tool aimed at increasing the capacity of Fire Protection Associations, Veldfire Managers and municipalities to manage veldfires appropriately by being aware of the likelihood of the veldfires occurring in their area beforehand". The NFDRS is Information Technology for the support of veldfire management and comprises an early warning system for predicting conditions conducive to occurrences of veldfires.

According to Minister Sonjica various organisations have been using different systems to communicate fire danger rating to their respective constituencies. She said, "However government realised a need to establish and maintain a common system for the entire country, for the benefit of all citizens of our country. As you have daily weather forecasts by the South African Weather Service through radio, television, newspapers and other means of communication, you will also have daily forecasts for the likelihood of veldfires in your areas by the South African Weather Services".

According to Minister Sonjica the NFDRS could change the lives of many and contribute towards building a healthy and thriving nation, as unwanted veldfires are serious and a persistent problem in South Africa. Minister Sonjica called to mind the Western Cape fires of January 2000, the fires in Mpumalanga in August 2003, the Kruger National Park fires of 2001 and finally the January 2005 structural fires in Cape Town that raged through a number of informal settlements that left many without shelter and which cost many others their entire livelihoods. She said "most of these veldfires caught the affected communities unaware due to the lack of an adequate Early Warning System, which could have alerted the responsible agencies to prepare for this kind of occurrence".

Minister Sonjica emphasised the fact that veld fires hinder economic growth and thereby exacerbate poverty. "They destroy poor communities, farming communities and their workers' livelihoods", she said.

The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry administers the National Veld and Forest Fire Act, 1998 (Act 1001 of 1998), which provides a variety of mechanisms, institutions, methods and practices for the prevention, combating and management of veld, forests and mountain fires throughout the country. These include the formation of Fire Protection Associations for the prevention, suppression and management of veldfires. At present more than 60 of these voluntary organisations have already been registered.

The system will, amongst others help veldfire managers and decision makers to take precautionary measures when managing veldfires, identify conditions that could lead to high fire danger, identify activities which are prohibited under prevailing conditions, increase the state of veldfire readiness and raise awareness of the general public.

Minister Sonjica emphasised that "only if we take this seriously and observe the issued warnings, will the system become a success" and that "the system will also contribute to the overall disaster risk reduction – both nationally and internationally as we are also faced with cross-border veldfires to and from our neighbouring countries".

"When predictions indicate that the fire danger rating will be high or extreme, a warning will be issued through television, radio and local newspapers", said the Minister. "I therefore expect the citizens of this country to take note of such announcements for their benefit and the country at large".

Minister Sonjica reminded landowners of their responsibilities with regards to managing fires in terms of the Fire Act. These include landowners on whose property a veldfire may start and spread to and from, to prepare and maintain a firebreak around their property; that landowners have trained and fully equipped fire-fighting personnel on their properties during the fire season and that property owners should have adequate fire fighting resources/equipment in the case of an unlikely event of veldfire occurrence.

The NFDRS calculates the Fire Danger Index, which is an indicator of the rate of difficulty of suppressing veldfire. The system gives out the fire danger index by taking into account variables such as the weather and fuel factors. It will be communicated regularly to Fire Protection Associations and Disaster Management Centres. These agencies are expected to convey the information to their constituencies on the ground.