

Statement by Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, Mrs Lindiwe Hendricks on devastating veld fires

3 September 2008

South Africa is currently experiencing some of the most devastating veld fires this year that have already claimed the lives of 21 people and caused injury to many others since they started at the weekend. I wish to extend our sincere condolences to those who have lost loved ones and a speedy recovery to those who have suffered injury.

Working on Fire (WoF), a programme of the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry has deployed highly skilled and experienced fire-fighters on the ground, they report that seven of our nine provinces have been affected thus far by over 100 fires fanned by strong winds. The fire danger index according to the weather service for the remainder of this week (1 to 5 September 2008) continues to be moderate to high, this means the conditions that led to the current spate of veld fires still persist and the fires could flare up again.

KwaZulu-Natal has suffered the greatest loss of human life - seven civilians and one pilot are confirmed dead. Scores of live stock have perished and entire villages were damaged.

The extent of the challenges faced by the WoF teams in the execution of their duties are immense. On Sunday a ground crew from the Working on Fire Programme had to be withdrawn from the fire line in the Qudeni State Forest in KwaZulu-Natal when the fire became too aggressive to control. In that province alone an estimated 41 fires have destroyed some 22 000 hectares (ha) of grazing land, in Mpumalanga 49 fires have destroyed more than 22 000 ha of land of which 13 000 ha is forestry.

Many hectares of forests belonging to my department have also been destroyed in KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga where some fires are still raging.

The provinces of Free State, Gauteng, the Eastern Cape, North West and Limpopo have also been affected. People have lost their homes, properties, businesses and live stock has been destroyed. The damage caused to sawmills and timber in the Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga means businesses suffered losses and thus the livelihoods of people are affected.

The full extent of the damage caused by the fires will only become clear once the assessment has been completed.

Due to strong winds some of the aerial operations by our Working on Fire crews had to be suspended, but have since resumed. Most of the fires are now either under control or have been totally extinguished.

I want to commend the men and women from our Working on Fire programme who risk their lives every year to save others. To date WoF has deployed 13 fire-fighting crews in Mpumalanga, three in Limpopo, four in Gauteng, 13 to KwaZulu-Natal and three to the Eastern Cape. It is indeed their speedy responses to fires together with the fire protection associations in various and medical teams that has ensured the situation has not worsened.

I also want to acknowledge and thank the rescue teams and the disaster management teams at district municipalities in the different provinces; the ordinary citizens who have rendered assistance, as well as, the South African Police Service (SAPS) who have deployed aircrafts to aid fire-fighting efforts.

We are saddened to hear that in some instances there are indications that the fires may be as a result of arson. Together with the police services these matters will be investigated and offenders will be prosecuted (as provided for under the National Veld and Forest Fire Act).

I am also requesting that everyone take care not to accidentally cause fires through negligence of leaving or discarding cigarettes that are not extinguished; open fires are not left unattended and the necessary permission obtained from the local authorities for the burning of veld.

I urge motorists to take care when driving in areas where there are fires, as visibility is poor due to smoke and to be careful as there might be debris on the road.

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