



Lowveld & Escarpment Fire Protection Association Newsletter Issue 9 October 2016

Greetings,



We have a month to go until the end of the Lowveld fire season and due to the hot, dry conditions there have been numerous fires this year. It's a relief, therefore, that to date there has only been one 'big' fire which was successfully contained in less than 36 hours.

We urge members to continue to be alert, responsible landowners - it makes a world of difference in preventing the ignition and suppression of fires if everyone plays their part. Until next month!

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LEFPA Assists Forestry Companies at Huge Fires

Monday 22nd August was an intensely hot day, registering as Orange on the Fire Danger Index (FDI), which as LEFPA members know means that the danger of fire is high. In the afternoon fires blazed fiercely in the LEFPA area, sending clouds of grey smoke to the heavens. Aided by good weather on the second day, when the wind dropped and humidity rose, the exhausted fire-fighters finally managed to contain the fires after enduring the heat and flames for more than 24 hours. However, over the following few days flare ups were frequent, and LEFPA dispatched nine ground teams to assist forestry resources and deal with the outbreaks.

All of LEFPA's dedicated resources were used on the two fires, which included four spotter planes, four helicopters and six fixed wing bombers from five service providers. An Incident Command System (ICS) was implemented by the relevant forestry companies. This is a standardised approach to the command, control and coordination of emergency response units / sectors, providing a common chain of command within which the responders from multiple agencies can be effective.

An unfortunate 2500 hectares of farmland, commercial plantation and bushveld were destroyed within the LEFPA area. At the same time, fires began in Swaziland and a further 2500 hectares burnt there. Fortunately there were no injuries, loss of life or damage to property, however, Andre Scheepers was concerned by the risky behaviour of spectators. Members of the public stopped their vehicles in dangerous areas and some even ran onto active airfields to take photographs.

Once again, the bravery and dedication of the ground and air crews deserves a round of applause. The volume of smoke was such that it appeared the planes were flying into a solid grey wall while the ground crews endured many hours of energy sapping heat and breathing smoke saturated air. The devastation left on the ground underscores the danger faced by the firefighters.

An investigation into the cause of the fires is underway.



Letter of Appreciation

LEFPA has received another appreciative letter from a grateful member.

Thank you Annalize van Wyk for taking the time to get in touch. The team have been hard at work this season and knowing their labour is valued makes it all worthwhile.

Good day to all the awesome LEFPA people, Herewith Komatiland Forests would like to thank all LEFPA employees who participated in the Bergvliet fire. You were all great and your fast professional responses to all calls were outstanding.

With our fire season that is peaking, we trust that the good relationship will continue for the remainder of the season and all other fire seasons lying ahead of us all.

Keep up the good work and thank you once again.

Kindest Regards

Annalize van Wyk

Fire Risk Officer

Komatiland Forests

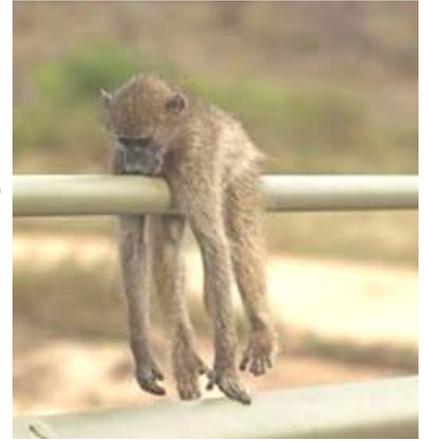
Exhausted, but Remaining Alert

After two weeks of Orange Fire Danger Index (FDI) status, the LEFPA Dispatchers could be forgiven for drooping with exhaustion like this little guy pictured on the right. LEFPA Manager Andre Scheepers says it's been a challenging season this year.

Hotter and drier with a higher FDI average than 2015, the despatchers have also been faced with three or four fires burning simultaneously at wide spread locations, stretching the team to the maximum.

The team have stretched, but not snapped. Mark Wagner reports that fires have been contained well due to the high alertness and quick reaction of management, fire fighting staff and that maximum resources (both ground and aerial) are utilized on initial attack.

With just a month of the official season remaining, all LEFPA staff and resources remain alert and ready for action.



Drones a Threat to Aerial Firefighting

Suppressing the massive fires at the end of August was stressful enough for the firefighting pilots, who were horrified to discover that a drone had been flying in their operational air space. There is a lot of media exposure on drones and how they could be useful to emergency services, however LEFPA does not support their use at the current time.



Firefighting aircraft occupy the airspace between 0 and 500 feet above ground level to perform their task of extinguishing fires - which is where the irresponsible drone user seems to fly their craft.

With smoke and heat haze affecting visibility, a mid-air impact between a sightseeing drone and a bomber, helicopter or spotter plane is possible, even likely.

In a nutshell, flying drones near wildfires is not safe, it poses a safety risk to the pilots already risking their lives to curtail damage and losses. A pilot's life, damaged aircraft and a liability claim against a drone user should be enough deterrent to keep your drone on the ground.

So lets leave the birds eye view of the conflagration below to the licensed, skilled pilots in the planes and choppers, shall we?

August Statistics

Lowveld 14:00 Actual FDI						Rain (mm)
Total	6	63	50	4	0	40.4
May	2	23	6	0	0	23.5
Jun	2	15	13	0	0	6
Jul	2	15	13	1	0	8.5
Aug	0	10	18	3	0	2,4
Sep						
Oct						
Nov						

Escarpment 14:00 Actual FDI						Rain (mm)
Total	4	71	43	4	0	29,9
May	0	27	4	0	0	23.5
Jun	1	17	10	1	0	6
Jul	3	17	10	1	0	8.5
Aug	0	10	19	2	0	2,4
Sep						
Oct						
Nov						

Tackling Timber Theft

Pieter Knipschild, Chairperson of the Lowveld Timber Theft Forum reports that it is not only fire that devastates timber plantations but timber theft as well and this poses a fire risk to growers. The four Timber Theft Forums in South Africa are kept busy combating plantation crime in plantations - stealing trees is easier than one thinks.

The syndicates are well organized, sending labourers into the plantations during the day to target trees too young to be felled by growers. After felling and cutting the trees into 6m pole lengths, they return late at night with a truck to load and make off with their ill-gotten gains. Lathes and droppers are cut out from coppice compartments.

Resourceful criminals don't restrict their activities to plantations alone. Logs are appropriated from depots while pulp and mining timber is skimmed from the trucks en route to the market or processing facility. Although the operators are well organized, they do not implement any safety procedures during their operations in the plantations, creating a fire risk.

Timber theft is most prevalent on properties with absent landowners, poor stock controls at depots and by farmers and outlets who either knowingly accept this stolen timber or who are ignorant of the source. In addition, the industry doesn't have a standard regarding vehicle permits, and truck drivers and owners claim innocence of their load.

Pieter says that although the Forum is making a difference, timber theft is not seen by the SAPS as a serious crime and it's difficult to obtain arrests and enforce convictions, which is bad news for plantation farmers and owners. This illegal industry leads to huge financial losses; the cost of stolen timber, replanting as well as the increased cost of security, erodes profits. A loss of profit often leads to retrenchments and discord among industry players. Often, this discord is a reason for disgruntled thieves burning forests. Pieter strongly urges farmers to report their incidents to Joey Lascelles via email - joeyl@ufproducts.co.za as this assists the Forum to track where the syndicates are operating. He warns against approaching the thieves as they are dangerous and will retaliate.



Activities for the Month - October

- No more firebreak burning allowed. • Attend LEFPA meetings regularly. • Distribute your standby rosters to all neighbours.
- Check airstrips on a weekly basis. • Perform daily and weekly checks of all equipment, using checklists.
- Study weather systems and check forecasts on the internet. • Obtain FDI forecast on a daily basis from LEFPA
- Perform checks to ensure readiness and quick reaction at all times.

General Info:

- Basic Firefighting Training is available to LEFPA members. Interested parties can contact the LEFPA office.
- All membership fees have been invoiced. If you have not yet received your invoice please contact Corné at the LEFPA office.
- FDI weather emails and SMSs are available to LEFPA members, contact Corné for more information.

www.lefpa.co.za

