



Get to know **your local FPA**

BY JO-ANNE SMETHERHAM

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

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 FPA," he says. "Preventative measures were the most important thing. We had firebreaks in place, trained staff and a very well-coordinated 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 fire-protection associations (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 he/she has the equipment, protective clothing and trained people required to start fighting such fires.

If a fire spreads onto someone else's land, destroying his or her property, the owner of the land where the fire started is financially liable. However, members of an FPA are usually protected from this liability, as they can prove they have taken reasonable steps to prevent the damage.

They can also take out insurance that covers the cost of professional fire-fighters putting out these fires, which non-members will have to pay themselves.

The FPA is not a fire-fighting force; the legislation requires landowners to have some staff trained in fighting fires, but they

do this only until the official fire-fighting forces arrive and take over.

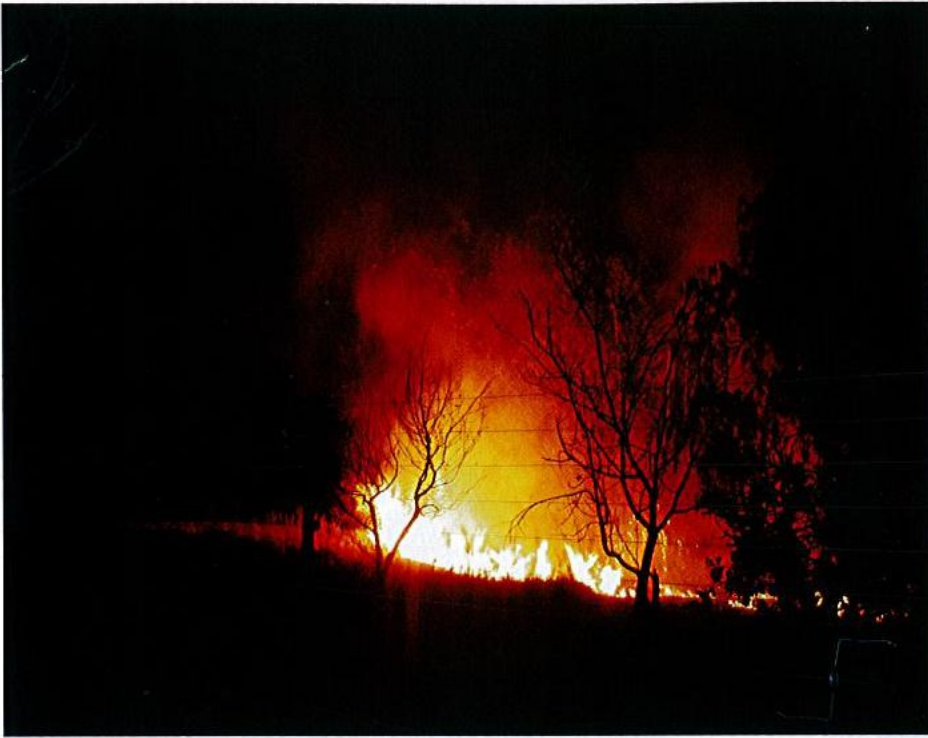
Membership of an FPA can cost as little as a few hundred rand a year for private landowners, depending on the size of their property.

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 from a fire that ignites on their own land and spreads to destroy their neighbours' property.

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 a total of two million hectares 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.

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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 also covers a massive four million hectares of land incorporating parts of the Western Cape and Eastern Cape. This FPA covers the whole of Eden District municipal area, Tsitsikamma, the Langkloof and Baviaans-kloof areas.

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.

On their own, these landowners cannot fulfil the legal obligations to prevent and fight fires. However, this is possible when they join the Cape Peninsula Fire Protection Association.

"We want all landowners on the urban edge to become part of our efforts," Prins says.

The Cape Peninsula FPA members' work in preventing, spotting wildfires and alerting the fire-protection officer regularly leads to the suppression of blazes that would otherwise threaten property, he adds.

The FPA model has grown to a provincial and national level. 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 act requires local municipalities and any owner of state land, including local and national conservation bodies, such as Cape Nature and SANParks, to join their local FPA. The legislation also obliges each FPA to develop a wildfire-management strategy. This strategy should include plans to co-ordinate their efforts with those of neighbouring FPAs, so that they can work together to manage fires that cross their boundaries.

These 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 approach, which includes preventing unwanted fires through firebreaks and controlled burns; letting a wildfire burn when this is needed for the indigenous veld to regenerate; removing alien vegetation, which can fuel huge, runaway fires; suppressing wildfires that might burn down buildings or farms; and fire awareness and advocacy in the surrounding towns and villages.

It is not necessary for people living in towns and villages to join FPAs, although these people can play a role by encouraging their local fire departments to join the local FPA, to form one if it does not yet exist, and to practise integrated fire management.

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 buildings and airstrips from their members, 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 number of members within each FPA to the point where the extension officer's salary is covered.

"It's a Catch-22 situation," says Paul Gerber, chair of the Southern Cape FPA. "We need to increase our membership, 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 IFM, 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 sustainable fire-management model in the face of a changing climate that can be replicated across South Africa, and even 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.

"It needs very strict management, but we already have that in our FPAs. The way they are working together collaboratively is really amazing, and extremely effective."

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

"We are no longer looking for a fire-management model that works. We already have one," he says. "The programme really is set for success." ■