

Wild-fire warning to George land owners

GEORGE NEWS - Paul Gerber, head of the Southern Cape Fire Protection Association (SCFPA), says the table is set at George and surrounds for the perfect wild-fire storm.

In an interview with Cobus Meiring (Natural Bridge Communications), co-ordinator of the George initiative to engage private land owners on the threat posed by ever-increasing invasive alien plants, Gerber says fuel load is what determines fire risk, and invasive alien plants increase that risk exponentially.

"Land owners allowing their properties to be over-run with invasive alien plants, must be aware that should a fire start on their properties, they may well be held accountable should the fire spread out of control and cause damage elsewhere.

"The fires that raged through areas surrounding George in 2006 caused millions of rands in damages, and some claims are still disputed in court to this day."

Fire in Fynbos areas

Tineke Kraaij, SANPARKS researcher and specialist in fynbos fire ecology, says her research shows that, on average, the mountain fynbos in the Outeniqua section of the Garden Route National Park burns every 11 to 16 years. "Fynbos is a fire-prone and fire-driven ecosystem and the occurrence of fire is thus a given in these landscapes."

According to Kraaij, burn intervals of less than 10 years are likely to be ecologically detrimental, as indigenous fynbos requires sufficient time to recuperate from burns.

"With short burn intervals, species such as proteas and Leucadendrons, which are slow to produce flowers and seed, are lost from plant communities when they are unable to reproduce after fire. At the same time, several invasive species (such as pine trees and hakea shrubs) in fynbos areas are adapted to fire, and they spread vigorously after fire has swept through an area.

"Farms such as Woodifields and Far Hills are today testimony of dense stands of black wattle growing out of control since wild-fire raged through the properties in 2006, causing millions of new seedlings to sprout, and rapidly grow in perfect conditions."

Join the SCFPA and prepare for wild fire

Gerber says land owners with invasive alien plants on their properties, should make a start clearing their land. "Land owners with serious invasive alien problems should take on small pieces of land at a time, and finish them off completely before moving on to the next.

"Be advised that high risk properties require more equipment to fight fires, and that they have to ensure that their fire breaks are wider than twice the height of the highest growth bordering on their fire break."

Land owners who join the SCFPA can request its assistance in any number of ways, including the assistance from Working on Fire teams when fires start on their properties.

"Also, land owners must take care, when clearing their land, dry bio-mass should not be left behind in stacked heaps, as that poses an even bigger threat than stands of invasive alien plants and trees."

Bio- mass should either be burnt or removed

SCFPA members receive up-to date fire index information, and, through the FPA, can call on aerial fire suppression if required in severe cases. Once land owners have registered with the FPA, they can request expert advice on how to best prepare for wild-fire, and at the same time qualify for all the benefits associated with membership.

It is easy to become a member of the FPA and not expensive. Simply visit the website and follow the steps: www.scfpa.co.za.