

## **NOTES OF “WILDFIRE STRATEGIC WORKSHOP – TURNING WILDFIRE LESSONS INTO ACTION PLANS” – 19 MARCH 2019 AT NMU, GEORGE**

Attendees (For WRRRA & Greater Wilderness FMU's): André Hacquebord, Tony Bowen, Dave Hill

These notes will only provide a brief background to a full day workshop.

The workshop was organised by the Garden Route District Municipality (GRDM) Fire & Rescue Services Department, based on the analysis and recommendations of Vulcan Wildfire Management on the Knysna Fires of 2017. Attendees ranged from Mayors, Senior Officials and Councillors, Disaster Managers and Fire Chiefs to representatives of SANParks, Cape Nature, Dept. of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF), Southern Cape Fire Prevention Association (SCFPA), independent wildfire services organisations, and community based organisations (such as Lions, SPCA, WRRRA through whom the FMU's were invited).

Several useful presentations were given by the GRDM Municipal Manager, the GRDM Mayor, Vulcan Fire Management, Garden Route Rebuild Initiative and DAFF. Key points from which are:

### **General**

- The Knysna Fire Report cannot “gather dust” and must be acted upon.
- Climate change and the effects of drought on the region are noted and have to be taken into account.
- It was acknowledged that there was little level of preparedness in the Knysna Fire.
- The lessons learnt from the Knysna Fire were implemented in the recent George 2018 fires. These included the Joint Operations Centre and the use of other Municipal services such as the Traffic Police, transport and emergency services.
- Multi-agency co-ordination and tracking were very good.
- Difficult debates and decisions will be required going forward, such as whether GRDM is the responsible Municipality for Disaster Management, rather than individual Municipalities in the region.

Ten Strategic Objectives<sup>1</sup> were developed by Vulcan from the report recommendations. These were used as the basis for the workshop sessions with the attendees being split into ten groups to consider the recommendations for their subject. The subject was discussed and action plans suggested as to how to meet these. [This group, with others, was in the Strategic Objective 2 Workshop “Public and Private Support of Community Resilience Efforts”.]

1. Significantly Enhanced Public Alerts and Incident Communications Systems
2. Public and Private Support of Community Resilience Efforts
3. Enforceable Planning, Building and Retrofitting and Codes For Wildfire Communities
4. Fundamental Shift In Fuel Management Policies and Strategies
5. Embracing of Technology and Intelligence Systems

6. Development of Wildfire Specialist Capabilities
7. Wildfire Resource Training and Preparedness Strategies
8. Overhaul of Wildfire Resource Strategy and Approach to Safety
9. Legislated National Adoption of Incident Command System (ICS)
10. Decisive Short, Medium and Long-Term Plan for Multi-Agency Collaboration

### **Community Issues**

- A number of the Authorities commented on and expressed concern about the potential for a disaster in Wilderness, with a lack of fire breaks, limited / difficult access roads, steepness of slopes and the houses and buildings on them and amongst the dune vegetation, a significant amount of which are aliens. It is considered to be “a perfect storm” gathering.
- Communities are not knowledgeable of what to do in the event of a disaster nor ready to help themselves. Community readiness is an issue that has to be developed and funding will be sought to communicate it.
- Communities need to be “hardened” and become resilient to wildfires, which will require landowner involvement.
- Communications to the public and media were significantly better during the George fires, with the use of area Whatsapp Groups playing a major role.
- The various Authorities are realising that local communities must be more involved, as they have knowledge of the areas and are potential “first responders”.
- Fire Management Units (or Areas / Sectors) need to have a greater role as per the SCFPA mandate and require support from the latter.
- Less apathy and more shared responsibilities by land owners is required with cohesion in wildfire (and emergency) planning, for which training and planning is needed.

### **Operations**

- Significant work is in progress by various agencies and consultants to assess economic and social assets, veld age, ownership, fuel loads and many other parameters that can be used in modelling the region.
- Standard Operating Procedures need to be implemented for rapid incident assessment, status, authorisation and deployment of the necessary resources by the Authorities concerned. Current requirements tend to be bureaucratic and delay responses, such as initiation of air response in the event of a high-risk wildfire.
- An excellent guide for wildfire preparation and management is provided by the Bryan Fire Department, Texas, USA and is on their web site.

### **Aliens**

- Rapid, dense alien regrowth has been seen in Knysna and is following in the burn scar following the George fires of 2018. This will have a significant effect on fuel loads in a few years' time. Removal of these is a major issue affecting all landowners, from small to large.
- The costs in alien clearing are acknowledged and ways of overcoming the funding issues will be sought. It is not a short-term project.

## **Way Forward**

- Way forward in saving lives is to know where people are, how to access, contact and evacuate them safely. Mitigation projects are being developed for presentation to GRDM by mid-May.
- Land Use Risk Management is a useful tool for assessing risk and can be used at national, provincial, district, municipal, sector and farm levels.

Following the Workshop sessions, feedback was provided from each group and questions arising from these were recorded for inclusion into the Workshop Report. The latter is expected to be available to attendees within two to three weeks' time, depending on release by GRDM.

Further information to follow, as this becomes available.