

National Arbor Week 2005: Western Cape
Launch of the National Fire Danger Rating System
Speech by Ms BP Sonjica, MP, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Kirstenbosch, Cape Town
7 September 2005

Ministers

Colleagues from the Department of Provincial and Local Government

Colleagues from the South African Weather Service

Members of the Forestry Industry and the farming community

Dignitaries

Ladies and Gentlemen – and a particular greeting for our representatives from Fire Protection Associations.

Today we are gathered here for a good cause intended to benefit the citizens of this country – the launch of the National Fire Danger Rating System, an Early Warning System that could change the lives of many and contribute towards building a healthy and thriving nation. This System is needed because we know that unwanted veldfires are a serious and persistent problem in South Africa for a variety of reasons. This can be partially attributed to urbanisation, rural development and dry weather conditions amongst other factors.

Distinguished guests, please allow me to refresh your memories regarding some of the veldfires experienced in South Africa in the past few years, which really touched not only my heart, but also that of the entire country.

Some will remember:

- The Western Cape fires of January 2000 in which property worth millions was lost;
- The Mpumalanga fires of August/ September 2003, which cost the Forestry Industry R3 to R4 billion;
- The Kruger National Park fires of 2001 in which 23 people from poor communities lost their lives and scores of others sustained serious injuries; and
- Finally the January 2005 structural fires that raged through a number of informal settlements leaving many without shelter and cost some citizens to lose their entire livelihoods.

Most of these veldfires caught the affected communities unaware due to the lack of adequate Early Warning System, which could have alerted the responsible agencies to prepare before for these kinds of occurrence. These veldfires also hinder economic growth thereby exacerbating poverty. They destroy poor communities and the farming community and their workers' livelihoods.

It is in the light of these that we, as Government, could not and cannot afford to let the situation continue unabated. My Department is administering the National Veld and Forest Fire Act, 1998 (Act 101 of 1998), which provides a variety of mechanisms, institutions, methods and practices for the prevention, combating and management of veld, forests and mountain fires throughout the country. It is on the basis of this piece of legislation that we are able to act proactively.

These include the formation of Fire Protection Associations, which are voluntary organisations for the prevention, suppression and management of veldfires. I am proud to report that my Department has now registered more than sixty Fire Protection Association's and many more are applying on daily basis.

The National Fire Danger Rating System for South Africa, which we are launching today in partnership with the South African Weather Services, is a tool aimed at increasing the capacity of Fire Protection Association's, Veldfire Managers and Municipalities to manage veldfires appropriately by being aware of the likelihood of the veldfires occurring in their area beforehand, through the National Fire Danger Rating System.

We note that various organisations have been using various systems to communicate fire danger rating to their constituencies in some parts of the country for a long time now. However, Government realised a need to establish and maintain a common system for the entire country, for the benefit of all citizens of our country. As you have daily weather forecasts by South African Weather Service through radio, television, newspapers and other means of communication, you will also have daily forecasts for the likelihood of veldfires in your area by South Africa Weather Services.

The National Fire Danger Rating System is an early warning system for predicting conditions conducive to occurrences of veldfires. It is information technology for the support of veldfire management. It does this by calculating the fire danger index, which is an indicator of the rate of difficulty of suppressing veldfire. The system gives out the fire danger index by taking in to account variables such as the weather and fuel factors. It will be communicated regularly to Fire Protection Associations and Disaster Management Centres. These agencies are expected to convey the information to their constituencies on the ground.

The system will, amongst other things:

- Help veldfire managers and decision makers to decide on precautionary measures to take when managing veldfires;
- Identify conditions that would lead to high fire danger probability;
- Identify activities which are prohibited under prevailing conditions;
- Increase the state of veldfire readiness; and
- Raise awareness to the general public.

When predictions indicate that the fire danger rating will be high or extreme, a warning will be issued through television, radio and local newspapers. I, therefore, expect the citizens of this country to take note of such announcements for their benefit and the country at large.

I would like to invite and encourage the media, both print and electronic, to publish these reports in the areas of their operations to warn communities of the danger of veld fires. This will be the media's contribution to social development, especially in rural areas, and the protection of lives and property.

After thorough studies and consultative processes of comparing our local systems and other systems used elsewhere in the world, we unanimously agreed that we should adopt the United States Fire Danger Rating model, with some modification to suit our local conditions, as the National Fire Danger Rating System for South Africa. We are, therefore, here today to formally launch the National Fire Danger Rating System. It is also imperative to mention Ladies and Gentlemen, that South Africa is the first country in Africa to have a fire early warning system. We hope that we will, in future, be sharing our experiences and expertise regarding the system, with our counterparts throughout the Continent as part of the New Partnership for Africa Development (NEPAD) initiatives, especially with our neighbours in Southern African Development Community (SADC).

Our colleagues and partners from the South African Weather Service will run the system with our full support. As required in terms of the National Veld and Forest Fire Act, 1998 the country has been divided into forty-two fire danger-rating regions that are relatively similar in terms of topography and vegetation.

I believe that many stakeholders including fire protection associations, nature conservation agencies, non-governmental organisations and municipalities have been waiting in anticipation for the inauguration and implementation of the National Fire Danger Rating System. I, therefore, hope and believe that the system will be used as a veldfire management tool. It is also important to mention that only if we take this seriously and observe the issued warnings, will the system become a success. Remember that the system will also contribute to the overall disaster risk reduction – both nationally and internationally as we are also faced with cross-border veldfires to and from our neighbouring countries.

By upholding the system, we will be improving the lives of many vulnerable South Africans – especially the rural poor who are the hardest hit by unwanted veldfires. I look forward to your continued support in future.

While we are building veldfire management capabilities through the introduction of the system, we also have to support this by observing other statutory requirements. For example, Chapter 4 of the National Veld and Forest Fire Act, 1998 requires every landowner on whose property a veldfire may start and spread to and from, to prepare and maintain a firebreak around their properties. Chapter 5 of the same Act requires that during a fire season every landowner has on their premises trained fire-fighting personnel who are fully equipped with fire fighting clothing. The property owner should also have adequate fire fighting resources/equipment in the case of an unlikely event of veldfire occurrence. It is therefore important that landowners observe and meet these statutory requirements to ensure full compliance with the law.

I would like to thank everyone involved in the process of developing this System for their vision, commitment and perseverance in getting it off the ground. Let me not forget to convey my greatest gratitude to Department for International Development (DfID) who provided funding for the project since the beginning of its development in 2003. We have seen today what levels of professionalism we can expect from our donors, stakeholders and officials from other spheres of Government.

The first few months of the running of the system will pose a challenge to everyone involved but I am confident that through unity - we will conquer.

Thank you.