

Points for Consideration by Minister Ronnie Kasrils

Launch of Working on Fire in the Western Cape

10h00 Tuesday. 3 February 2004

Newlands Forest Station

1. Wild fires are costing the country millions of Rands every year. For the forestry plantation industry alone, the months of August and September 2003 were disastrous in terms of forest fires. Some 30,000 hectares of timber plantations were destroyed, making it the worst fire season experienced during the last 20 years.
2. After these fires, the CEO the Forestry South Africa, Mr Mike Edwards, wrote to Dr Preston to say, "It is clear that the damage inflicted could have been considerably greater, had it not been for the unhesitating assistance rendered to the fire fighting effort by both the **Working for Water** and **Working on Fire** programmes. This assistance came from personnel and equipment and was rendered without fear of the dangers involved. On behalf of the South African Forestry Industry and all members of Forestry South Africa, I must therefore place on record our sincerest gratitude and thanks for everything that you and members of your two programmes did

to assist us. It was a magnanimous effort that will long be appreciated by all.”

3. This letter is all the more remarkable when one thinks of the time it has taken for the forestry industry to align with the Government's position on invasive alien species. It shows how far we have come in forging partnerships that add value to all, in the long term.
4. **Working on Fire** is a national programme developed initially by the **Working for Water** programme, the **Forestry** Division of the Dept of Water Affairs and Forestry, and the **National Disaster Management Unit** in the Dept of Provincial and Local Government. Further partners have been forged with the Dept of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, the Dept of Agriculture, provincial agencies, local authorities and the South African National Parks. Linked to this has been a successful amalgamation of interests with the private-sector sponsored **Fire Fighting Association** in Mpumalanga and **Fire Protection Association** in KwaZulu-Natal.
5. Funded from an initial grant of R20 million from the **Working for Water** programme, **Working on Fire** has made impressive strides in working towards a national integrated response to fire prevention and control, backed by what are visionary provisions in the National Veld and Forest Fires Act of my Dept. The budget for **Working on Fire** for 2004/5 is R35

million. It is supplemented through the partnership with the **Fire Fighting Association** in Mpumalanga and the **Fire Protection Association** in KZN, to have the beginnings of a capacity to finally manage wild fires – for the first time in the history of our country.

6. Already **Working on Fire** can claim a remarkable achievement. During the Winter fire season in KwaZulu-Natal, a fire swept towards a rural settlement. The **Working on Fire** helicopter saw 22 villagers trapped on a cliff by the approaching fire. Risking everything, the pilot plucked these villagers from certain death. Apparently the only reason they could take off with that load was that they were so low on fuel. It was an event that was done with little fanfare or recognition. I must call upon **Working on Fire** to claim its victories, for it is through such awareness-raising that we can truly and timeously build the programme into what it promises to be.
7. We now celebrate the **Working on Fire** partnership linking with the fire-fighting capacities in the Western Cape – the Santam/Cape Argus **Ukuvuka** Campaign, the City of Cape Town, the Western Cape Provincial Government, the Cape Nature Conservation Board and the South African National Parks.
8. Let me acknowledge that the inspiration for the **Working on Fire** programme was strongly drawn from the success of the Santam/Cape

Argus **Ukuvuka** Campaign. I would like to commend the City of Cape Town, SANParks and Sandra Fowkes and her **Ukuvuka** team for the work that they have done, to raise the awareness of fire management along the Table Mountain chain. I recently attended a most interesting experiment, to ascertain the possibility of using helicopters in fighting shack fires in informal settlements. I must commend them for their creative approaches to these most dreadful of fires.

9. **Working on Fire** is steeped in the principles of the Government's Expanded Public Works Programme. It is a labour-intensive initiative that provides training and empowerment for the marginalized in our society. Some 550 people will find employment through **Working on Fire** during this year. One can only speculate on how many jobs will be saved as a result of its actions. We know that the devastating fires along the southern Cape area – which led to my asking Dr Preston to attempt to begin such an initiative three years' ago – cost hundreds of people their livelihoods. The same is true of countless fires all over the country.
10. I must acknowledge that fire is a crucial component of veld management. We need fire for many of our natural systems, and most notably the fynbos and grassland systems. What **Working on Fire** will help the authorities to achieve is the controlled use of fire for optimal veld management.

11. The vision of this partnership is ultimately dependent upon land-owners taking responsibility for fire on their properties. The **National Veld and Forest Fires Act** is explicit in defining these responsibilities. I would like to urge all land-owners to fire-proof their properties, clear the invasive alien plants on their properties, control the biomass generally, and ensure that the required fire-breaks are in place and maintained.
12. We are investing significant amounts of money in securing this integrated approach to fire-management. It will not work if land-owners do not cooperate. Ask anyone who has lost everything in a fire. Ask the families of those killed in such fires. It is in all of our enlightened self-interests to work with **Working on Fire**.
13. There remains the threat of some groups wanting to “do their own thing”. While this may be a natural tendency, it is clear to me that well-constructed partnerships will always add greater value. I appeal to all concerned to unite behind the **Working on Fire** programme. Central to this is for affected land-owners to join the local **Fire Protection Associations** that are being developed by my Department.
14. Finally, in tribute to the **Working for Water** programme that donated part of its Poverty Relief funding to get **Working on Fire** off the ground, and

was also the driving force behind the **Ukuvuka** Campaign, may I remind you that every single house that burned down in the January 2000 fires along Table Mountain, was surrounded by invasive alien plants. Please help us to control this curse that not only threatens us with far more intense fires, but impacts on water security, biological diversity, the productive use of land, mudslides, erosion and so much more.

15. The next time you see a helicopter carrying its load of water and its warriors to fight a wild fire, remember this **Working on Fire** partnership. It will save many lives, property, memories, jobs, investments. It could save yours.

16. Viva **Working on Fire!** Viva **Working for Water.** Viva **DWAF Forestry.** Viva the **National Disaster Management Unit.** Viva the **Dept of Environmental Affairs and Tourism.** Viva the **Dept of Agriculture.** Viva the **Western Cape Provincial Government.** Viva the **City of Cape Town.** Viva **SANParks.** Viva the **Fire Fighting Association** in Mpumalanga and the **Fire Protection Association** in KwaZulu-Natal.
END.