

7 tips to prevent veld fires

Prepare for the dry winter season in the West Rand – prevent veld fires and learn some safety tips. Veld fires are a risk to life, property and environment. These fires will continue to burn for as long as the weather is favourable and there is vegetation to burn.

The following are some of the causes:

- Reckless disposal of cigarette butts
- Burning fires in metal drums at bus stops while waiting for the bus
- Land clearings
- Deliberate fire setting
- Children playing with matches
- Improper household ash disposal.

For the above-mentioned reasons, communities throughout the West Rand must be able to manage or eliminate this risk by drawing up a preventative or corrective action.

Control tips:

- Prepare fire breaks on their side if there is a reasonable risk of veld fires.
- Have the necessary equipment, protective clothing and trained personnel to extinguish these fires.
- Avoid throwing cigarettes butts on the ground.
- Have grass beaters handy to extinguish the fire.
- Sand can be a very effective method of veld fire control since water will not be readily available.
- Open fires are a common cause of uncontrolled fires in the West Rand District. It's a good idea not to start a fire when it's dry and especially not when it's windy.
- Check with your local fire department before making fires outside.
- On certain days recreational fires will be prohibited, as indicated by the daily fire danger rating. This rating predicts the expected difficulty involved to put out runaway fires, and the higher the rating, the more dangerous the conditions are.
- The rating is your trigger to act, so to stay safe you need to stay aware of the Fire Danger Rating in your area. During the fire season, the Fire Danger Rating will feature in weather forecasts and be broadcast on radio and TV and published in some newspapers.

What are the responsibilities in terms of fire prevention on landowners/users regarding veldfires?

The National Veld and Forest Fire Act 101 of 1998 prescribe the following statutory landowner requirements:

Responsibilities of people in control of land

All owners on whose land a fire may start or burn or from whose land it may spread must:

- Prepare firebreaks on their side of the boundary. Owners of adjoining land may agree to position a common firebreak away from the boundary. Discuss fire breaks with neighbours and plan together – it should be in the right place, cost effective and be practical to implement. Document your agreed fire breaks.

Fire prevention through firebreaks

- It should be wide enough and long enough to have a reasonable chance of preventing a fire from spreading to or from neighbouring land;
- It does not cause soil erosion;
- It is reasonably free of flammable material capable of carrying a fire across it; and
- It is maintained.

Some natural (or human made) veld conditions, e.g. recently burned veld (younger than four years), a natural vlei, a dam or river, old farmlands and floodplains can be regarded as a natural firebreak. The width of firebreaks depends on where it is to be made:

- Firebreaks in crop residue /fallow land – at least 2, 5 m wide.
- Fynbos/Natural veld on agricultural land – 2, 5 m x the height of vegetation (minimum of 5 m).
- Road verge (provincial and district roads) – 3 m on either side to be maintained annually.
- Labour housing, farm infrastructure and homesteads – 10 m.
- Wild land interface – 20 m, depending on the adjacent land type such as Protected Areas, Formal Forestry Plantations etc.

Please check with your local municipality or fire brigade to confirm the rules and regulations for your area.

Have the necessary equipment, protective clothing and trained personnel for extinguishing fires as are prescribed in the regulations. If a fire should break out, take all reasonable steps to alert the neighbours and notify the relevant fire brigade, fire protection officer of the local Fire Protection Association (FPA), if there is one. Do everything in your power to safely stop the fire from spreading. If the owner of the land is absent, he or she must appoint a responsible person on the land or nearby his or her land to take the needed precautions if a fire might occur, or assist to do so.

However, you cannot always effectively prevent, manage and fight fires on your own. You may want to consider becoming a member of your local Fire Protection Association (FPA). FPAs help land users to predict, prevent, manage and extinguish wildfires. Wildfires move through landscapes very quickly; destroying property, livelihoods, biodiversity and sometimes even lives.

Your local FPA can help land owners meet their legal requirements, provide training to land owners and their staff and guide them through fire management planning and also assist with firebreak preparation. You will be assisted to become legally compliant, as per national regulations. Members are offered training in firefighting, fire management and fire prevention. Membership is voluntary and there is a nominal joining fee.

There are FPAs across South Africa. If no FPA exists in your area, approach your district municipality or farmers' union to assist.

At home

- Make sure your home and buildings have been made safe against fire.
- Undertake an annual fire hazard assessment. Identify the risks/threats and what you can do to minimise them.

To-do list

- Reduce fuel loads and avoid uncontrolled alien vegetation infestation on your land.
- During the cooler months, controlled or prescribed burning is sometimes used and may decrease the likelihood of serious hotter fires. Controlled burning must be overseen by fire control authorities for regulations and permits. Please contact your local municipality or fire brigade.
- Share your plan with your neighbours and fire protection officer, if you have one.
- Make sure your firebreaks are in place and that they are wide and long enough to stop a fire.
- Discuss fire insurance for yourself with your insurance broker.
- Make sure contact numbers of Fire and Rescue services are easily accessible.
- Stay in touch; keep communication lines open. *WhatsApp*, sms or radios can be used.
- Formalise who is responsible for what, when a fire breaks out there is no time to allocate responsibilities; everyone must know exactly what they must do. Meet regularly to update your procedures.

All emergency numbers must be communicated to communities to report fire and rescue incidents to the correct services once an emergency occurs.

Emergency Numbers:

107 (Telkom)

011 951 3000 (Cell phones)