

## **FARMERS AND VELD FIRE PREPAREDNESS**

In a weeks' time the Environmental Management Agency will launch the National Fire Week in the Midlands. The event is held each year to raise awareness on the need to protect the environment from veld fires. The launch will cascade down to all provinces and districts as the Agency embarks on a drive to reduce veld fires. The heavy rains that the country received this agricultural season has resulted in vast tracts of biomass which act as fuel for veld fires, making farming communities more susceptible to veld fires. This makes it crucial for farming communities to know how to prepare for the fire season which starts on the 31<sup>st</sup> of May to the 31<sup>st</sup> Of October every year. Veld fires have become one of Zimbabwe's greatest environmental challenges, last year four people lost their lives to veld fires, whilst 1 119 274 hectares of land were destroyed. This was a 10.68% decline from the previous year; more effort is still needed so that we protect our ecosystems, properties and lives from veld fires.

### ***How do you protect your property from veld fires?***

Every land owner has a responsibility to put in place the necessary fire suppression measures on their properties as stipulated in the Forestry Act (Chapter 19:05) and Statutory Instrument 7 of 2007 (Environmental Impact Assessment and Ecosystems Protection) Regulations. These laws make it an offence for a farmer to fail to take fire preventative measures such as the construction of standard fire guards which are at least 9 metres wide before the onset of the fire season. Fire protection on properties should be planned; it is much more effective if it is co-ordinated. Farm owners can unite to construct fire guards around their properties.

### ***What Steps Should Be Taken?***

- A farmer needs to determine what s/he wants to achieve through fire protection; this entails determining whether it is the starting of fires that s/he wants to inhibit or the spreading of fires. This informs him/her on the areas where fire protection will be applied, i.e. on the entire property, whether he should protect his crops or buildings;

- A farmer should know at what time of the year fire protection is needed;
- A farmer should be able to determine the climatic conditions that prevail during the fire danger period, taking into consideration factors such as wind direction and wind speed. Fires spread rapidly in dry conditions and strong winds, such conditions make the control and extinguishing of fires difficult;
- A farmer needs to identify the dangerous areas, these are areas in which a fire could probably be started or from which it may spread and become a hazard e.g. from a public road that runs through a property, residential complexes and ash pits from which a fire may spread, inaccessible and remote areas, as well as areas with thick vegetation;
- A farmer needs to identify the areas that need to be protected, paying attention to residential complexes, stores, crops, pastures, fodder and farming implements storage areas and places in which fuel and other flammable substances are stored. S/he needs to identify safe places in which animals can be taken in the event of a fire.
- A farmer also needs to determine the precautionary measures that should be taken to limit the spread of a fire. The measures include the following;
  - The construction of fire breaks along the farm boundary with the co-operation of your neighbour;
  - The construction of fire breaks which are 4.5m wide around plantations to protect crops;
  - Controlled burning of areas with thick vegetation to reduce biomass;
  - The division of property into blocks/camps by making use of fire breaks. The breaks can be used to limit the spread of the fire;

Bear in mind however, that no fireguard will stop a fire in all conditions; firebreaks enable farmers to fight fires or to counter fire.

### ***What Matters Need Attention?***

- Controlled burning of veld fires should be completed by 31<sup>st</sup> May and fire breaks should be made by 15 June (winter rainfall);
- Fire fighting pumps should be in working conditions during the fire season;
- All equipment e.g. hoses, fire beaters should be checked weekly to ensure they are in good working order;
- Fire fighting equipment should be loaded on to vehicles before knocking off time especially when people break for the weekend, farmers should ensure that fire reactionary vehicles should have full tanks in case of an emergency;

### ***Veld fires and the collaborative approach***

A collaborative approach is needed when it comes to preventing veld fires. Farmers need to discuss with their neighbours on the fire protection measures and the steps they will take in the event of a fire. Neighbours should plan and formulate a plan of action together so that each one knows what is expected of him or her in event of a fire. It is advisable that farmers enter into a written agreement with the owners of adjoining land with regard to the burning of breaks or boundary agreed upon or on the common boundary. Fire breaks needed on the boundary can be prepared together with adjoining owners. If an agreement cannot be reached on the construction of fireguards, the local magistrate can be approached for arbitration to make a ruling that is binding to all parties concerned. The agreement should state the date by which fireguard construction should be completed, the width, length, location of the fireguards and the sharing of costs.

If the entire fireguard is to be burnt on one owner's property it is not necessary for him to enter into an agreement with the neighbour. The owner who is to burn the fireguard has to notify his neighbour in writing at least 14 days in advance. It is advisable that the neighbour be present when burning on the common boundary is done.

### ***Some Thoughts With Regards To Fire Protection on the Farm***

Fires are started countless times in ash pits; hot ash is thrown out and sets other flammable materials alight. Ash pit should be fenced with wire gauze at least 1.8- 2.0 meters as a precautionary measure, and burnt regularly (in safe weather conditions).

It is very important to plan the required fire protection measures in good time, often it is left until it is too late i.e. when there is already a fire outbreak or damage has been done.

Farmers should determine the fire protection equipment/ apparatus that is needed. A tractor with a trailer and a number of drums of water and a small pump can be used as a fire fighting unit. Make a number of fire beaters for placement on the back of the vehicle during the fire danger hazard periods. Fire fighting teams should be on standby during the fire season in order to react to outbreaks so as to avoid the loss of property, human life as well as environmental damage.

***Please talk to us we are always ready to listen. Email: [eep@ema.co.zw](mailto:eep@ema.co.zw) or 04 305543 / Toll free 08080028, sms/whatsapp 0779 777 094, Like our Facebook Page- Environmental Management Agency or follow us on Twitter @EMAeep.***