

ARE VELD FIRES A THREAT TO THE ENVIRONMENT

What are veld fires?

These are blazes that get out of control, become wild, and destroy extensive tracts of forests, grasslands, animals, people and their properties in the process. Fire, as part of natural process has a positive role in the vegetation structure and composition, and helps recycle nutrients contained in old and dead trees. There is, however, concern that the frequency, extent and pattern of burning are increasing due to human activities.

It is a fact that the damage from these fires has grown to outweigh the benefits of fire on the ecosystem. Frequent burning has implication on carbon stocks and emissions, wildlife habitat, human health and life as well as livelihoods.

S.I. 7 of 2007 Environmental Management (Environmental Impact Assessment and Ecosystems Protection) Regulation) as read with Environmental Management Act (CAP 20:27), outlaws the starting of fires outside residential and commercial premises during the period 31 July to 31 October of each year.

The causes of veld fires

There are several factors that cause veld fires but most are human ignitions resulting from:

- Reckless disposal of lit cigarette stubs;
- Smoking out of bees for honey harvesting;
- Lighting fires at road servitudes whilst waiting for early morning buses;
- Land clearing;
- Hunting;
- Deliberate lighting of fires / arson;
- Children playing with matches; and
- Improper household ash disposal.

Effects of veld fires

Veld fires lead to severe environmental degradation. More specifically, veld fires reduce land cover thus exposing the land to agents of accelerated soil erosion, changes in the hydrological cycle, increase in overland flow or surface run off and modifications in various ecological processes. Soil erosion leads to the siltation of rivers and dams, thus reducing their water carrying capacity. This is likely to induce floods in low-lying areas.

Veld fires destroy plantations, crops and pastures. In Zimbabwe, it is now commonly agreed that veld fires are a single significant threat to national economic recovery plans as they are destroying not only pastures necessary for the restocking exercise, they are also destroying vast plantations. Food security may be compromised as the last few years have seen fires burning wheat farms, maize fields among other valuables.

How do I know that a fire might occur?

- It is normally your dry season.
- You experience very hot conditions.
- There is a lot of potential fuel (e.g. dry leaves, wood, dead plants and grass).
- You can clearly see long dry grass and plants.
- There are moderate to strong winds present.

Veld fire trends

YEAR	HECTARAGE	FATALITY	FIRE INCIDENCES
2009	950 905	10	7 409
2010	1 152 413	25	9 361
2011	713 770	5	6 780
2012	1 320 325	16	1861
2013	1 179 274	4	1981

Veld fires and stakeholders

Each person or institution has a role to play in the fight against veld fires and the following can be of importance to prevent veld fires, destruction of the environment as well as loss of life and property.

a. School Children

In the event that school children come across fire:

- Quickly report the incident to any nearby adult person.
- Do not attempt to cross over fire, "crossing over fire may result in fatalities".
- Do not try to extinguish a veldt fire on your own
- move away from the veldt fire and never ever try to climb trees in the direction of a veldt fire

b. Bus passengers

Travelling can at times be done during the odd hours when the weather is very cold especially in the rural areas. These conditions make passengers make a fire at the bus stop for warmth. Therefore, before leaving:

- Make sure you completely extinguish the fire before leaving

- Make sure all the glowing splints and burning coal are completely extinguished using water.
- Put on warm clothes because history has shown that most road fires are left unattended.

c. Bee smokers

- Use other methods of extracting honey which does not involve use of fire
- Seek advice from Forestry Commission.

d. Motorists

- Put off cigarette stubs and use ashtrays.
- Assist in fire fighting and always travel with a fire extinguisher.
- Service car electrical and mechanical systems to avoid sparks which can cause veld fires

e. Traditional leaders

- Have fire fighting teams to put off uncontrolled veldt fires in your areas of jurisdiction.
- Carry out fire awareness campaigns throughout the fire season
- Use cultural ways of punishing those who cause veld fires.

f. Rural District Councils

Establish an environmental committee to oversee environmental issues

- Establish environmental sub –committees which are chaired by a councillor in a given ward or wards.
- appoint an environmental monitor in the district in conjunction with EMA
- Ensure that there are fire fighting committees in these various wards
- Report all veld fire incidences within 7 working days to EMA or ZRP.

What Farmers/Property owners need to know?

Fire prevention is the best option to minimise risks associated with veld fires. This can be achieved through establishment and maintenance of fireguards. Fireguards are designed to provide access and a safe environment for the fire fighting teams to implement controlled burning and effectively manage wildfires. The existing roads and tracks also provide the foundation to implement fire management activities.

- Construct standard fireguards which are at least 9m wide on boundaries and internal fire guards which should be at least 4.5m wide.
- Fireguards can be constructed by ploughing using ox-drawn ploughs or tractors, disking, hoeing.
- Always inspect your fireguards to make sure that they are free of combustible material.
- Fireguards are important because they break fire by removing the fuel load from the fire triangle.
- Ensure that fire fighting equipment is in place, bowzers/knapsack sprayers filled with water during the fire season.
- Report all fire incidences to the nearest ZRP or EMA offices within 7 working days.
- Always listen to the weather personnel on the fire danger index.
- If only the above stakeholders could take heed of the above advice, EMA hopes and trusts that there will be reduction in the occurrences of veld fires in the country. Reduction of veld fire management is therefore, everyone's responsibility, so play your part.

Quote of the week: "You must be the change you wish to see in the world- Mahatma Gandhi

Please talk to us we are always ready to listen. email: eep@ema.co.zw 04 305543/Tollfree 08080028