

Fire risks under scrutiny

GEORGE NEWS - "Wild fire is an intricate part of the natural system, but when invasive alien plants enter the equation wild fire can become a deadly and destructive enemy. Because of a high biomass density (large mass of organic matter like branches and leaves), fires fuelled by invasive alien plants are severe and extremely hot," said Benjamin Walton of Cape-Nature following talks between local organisations who recently came up with a fire prevention strategy.

CapeNature, which is currently working in close cooperation with Eskom, Southern Cape Fire Protection Association (SCFPA) and the Southern Cape Landowners Initiative (SCLI), shared their worries about the situation in the Southern Cape.

Said Natural Bridge Communication's Cobus Meiring this week, "Where high voltage power lines and commercial plantations (such as those managed by PG Bison and Cape Pine) meet, we have a potentially volatile mix of dangerous possibilities." He added, "Either power lines can be the cause of a wild fire, or a burning plantation can cause extensive damage to power supply systems and power outages."

Determining and isolating high risk areas

"In an effort to determine where invasive alien plants pose the highest fire risks to Eskom infrastructure, all those involved in managing fire risk are making use of technology," said Meiring. He added, "Through the Southern Cape Landowners Initiative, George landowners are increasingly becoming sensitised as to the problems caused by invasive alien plants on their properties." In an alliance with the SCFPA, George Landowners arranged a high level partnership with Eskom Distribution and Eskom Transmission, with the aim of determining high (fire) risk areas which can detrimentally effect regional energy security.

"Commercial Forestry, Cape-Nature and SANParks are on board to manage invasive alien plant fire risks," said Walton, who is assisting with technical matters pertaining to geographical information systems (GIS) . He emphasised, "The Southern Cape, just like the Boland, is a fire prone region and wild fires are a natural phenomenon."

Walton concluded, "From an ecological perspective, wild fire does play an important role in conservation and without it fynbos would not be able to procreate, as fynbos is dependent on fire to spread seed and germinate."

Meiring added, "Layers of GIS overlays on regional maps, telling fire risk managers where to focus fire awareness and, more importantly, where clearing and management of invasive alien plants should take priority.

"Eskom has to see to it that their power supply does not go up in flames and will have to manage their respective budgets and resources in accordance to the outcome of the fire risk determination study.

"We trust that these collective efforts will bode well for ensuring a safer environment, whilst we continue efforts to conserve our indigenous biodiversity from the destructive effects of invasive alien plants."

A member of the public this week pointed out that the high tension wires and sub-station in Knysna Road near the Glenwood House school should come under scrutiny as a potential hazard.

** Potensiële brandgevaarpunte is bespreek deur plaaslike rolspelers, veral waar indringerplante 'n bydraende risiko voeg tot die algehele prentjie in omgewingsbestuur. Cobus Meiring van Natural Bridge Communication het die week daarop gewys dat veral Eskom se hoogspanningsdrade in die nabyheid van indringerplante 'n gevaarpunt is en daarom die nodige aandag moet geniet wat brandvoorkoming betref.*

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