

Firebreaks: Act according to the rules

AGRICULTURE NEWS - The National Veld and Forest Fire Act 101 of 1998 requires landowners to prepare a firebreak on their side of the boundary where there is a reasonable risk of veldfire.

The Act does not specify requirements for firebreaks because the specific requirements for an effective firebreak vary from place to place.

The SCFPA is currently working on a minimum requirement document on fire brakes, rules and regulations for SCFPA members and will be made available in due course. A communication strategy/plan is also being developed and will be communicated to the SCFPA members and partners.

Firebreaks cannot stop every veldfire, and there will be a time when conditions are so severe that a fire will cross a firebreak. But firebreaks are useful in stopping many fires, in providing a access point to fight the fire or and to do back burns.

Firebreaks can be made by grading, ploughing, disking, hoeing or burning. However, any soil disturbance is subject tot the Conservation of Agricultural Resources Act (Cara Act), and owners should ensure that firebreaks are positioned in such a way as to cause the least disturbance to soil and biodiversity. Protected plants must however be transplanted, or the firebreak must be positioned in such a way to avoid them.

Neighbouring landowners may agree to change the position of the fire brake because of practical reasons. They may also agree to share a firebreak and agree to share the cost of maintaining this firebreak. This must be a written agreement signed by both parties for both of these agreements. It is unlawful to have an agreement NOT to have a firebreak.

The Act sets out a procedure for burning firebreaks, and neighbours must agree on a mutually acceptable date and position on a common boundary, and the neighbour or agent must be persent. The Fire Protection Association must be informed. The person making the break should have enough people present to stop the fire from spreading.

If the neighbours cannot reach an agreement, 14 days written notice must be given to neighbours and the FPA of the days on which you will be burning.

In some conditions burning cannot go ahead, such as when there is a high fire danger rating; in such an instant the neighbour and FPA must be informed of alternative days.

The Act states that the land owner must pay attention to weather, climate, terrain and vegetation in deciding on how to prepare the break. The break must be wide enough and long enough to have a reasonable chance of stopping the veldfire; not cause soil erosion, and be reasonable free of inflammable material.

For more information, contact Dirk Smit of Southern Cape Fire Protection Association at 044 302 6900 (office) or 072 785 2742.