

MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT AND TOURISM



**STATEMENT ON THE SITUATION WITH REGARD TO
VELD FIRES IN NAMIBIA**

BY

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Honorable Speaker

Honorable Members,

I rise to share information with this august house that Namibia's fire season has started in May as is the case almost every year. The country already witnessed some devastating fire threatening lives, property, degradation of the natural environment, destruction of crops, livestock and game fatalities across the country.

The frequency, intensity and extent of veld fires annually has become a serious concern for the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism despite our continued calls to members of the public and stakeholders to prevent the occurrence and spread of fires.

The most fire prone regions are Kavango East, Kavango West, Otjozondjupa, Oshikoto, Zambezi, Ohangwena, Kunene, Oshana, Omusati, Khomas, Hardap and Omaheke. This alone, a total of 580 480 hectares was burnt countrywide. As from May to September 2021, 99 Forest/veld fires occurred in the following regions; Omusati 4 covering 11,554 ha, Khomas 9 covering 75 000 ha, Oshikoto 5 covering 18 900 ha, Zambezi 16 covering 80 420 ha, Kunene 7 covering 100 167 ha, Kavango East 12 covering 40 000 ha, Kavango West 11 covering 45 500 ha, Omaheke 11 covering 30 764 ha, Otjozondjupa 16 covering 85 891 ha, Hardap 8 covering 20 284 ha. In the Omusati region 21 goats and sheep burnt to death and 2 cattle posts destroyed, In Khomas 25 farms burnt and 491 livestock and game killed, one human life lost and 4 severely injured.

Fire is an important tool for people throughout the country as it provides benefits for agricultural and forestry practices. However, fire remains a major threat with regard to the conservation of our forest resources whilst ultimately affecting grazing and other social and economic benefits our people derive from forests.

It is worrisome to observe that the country continues to report fire incidences destroying properties and the environment and putting people's lives in danger. Severe fires also disrupt the ecosystem and affect natural processes, which may be crucial in sustaining our livelihoods.

The reduction of forest fires therefore should be considered as an issue of national importance by all the role players particularly land and property owners.

Every year, prior to the start of the fire season, the Ministry develops and implements a robust fire management strategy to prevent, detect and suppress fires.

This strategy has components aimed at capacitating stakeholders and the public through education and training local communities in basics fire prevention and firefighting skills. We have gone further to sensitize members of the public on the dangers, preventative measures and suppression techniques of fires using public platforms such as radio, newspapers, television and social media.

As part of the strategy, the Ministry has started with the internationally accepted practice of the prescribed early burning mechanism which is the pre-planned

ignition of fire for specific purposes such as fuel reduction, habitat modification, and improvement of natural resources and removal of encroacher bush.

Additionally, the Ministry facilitates the preparation of extensive networks of firebreaks annually and to this effect, we are busy clearing firebreaks in most of the fire prone regions.

In 2020 we facilitated the construction / maintenance of 953 Kms firebreaks. This year the Ministry planned to facilitate the construction / maintenance of 2 117 Kms of firebreaks.

Additionally, this year, the Oshana region planned to clear 300 km whereby 90 km has cleared already using Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Land Reform tractors. Oshikoto region planned to clear 125 km, Omusati region 492 km, Ohangwena region planned to clear 150 km and 125 km cleared used MEFT Grader, Kavango East planned 150 and Kavango West planned to clear 300 km and Zambezi region planned to clear 200 km, Otjozondjupa planned to clear 250 km and Kunene planned to clear 150 km.

The Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism's National Remote Sensing Center continuously monitors and produces the fire bulletin on the occurrence of fire via satellite throughout the country.

Namibia received good rains in the previous raining season resulting in a high volume of biomass making the country even more prone to veld fires at a large scale. For this reason, we are appealing to members of the public, landowners and other stakeholders to be cautious and take a collective responsibility in

managing fire during this year's fire season. The prevention and suppression of forest/veld fires is not a solitary responsibility of the government.

Members of the public, farmers / landowners and all stakeholders are called upon to put in place necessary fire prevention measures such as fire cut lines or fire breaks of 15 m width in and around their properties as well as to have in place basic firefighting tools to assist in case a fire occurs.

Moreover, other land users such as charcoal burners and picnickers should strictly adhere to fire prevention measures. We recognize the importance of fire in people's livelihoods, particularly for cooking and for heating. However, all citizens must utilize fire responsibly, including land users preparing their crop fields for next ploughing season. We have noted with great concern that, most of the time, destructive fire is caused by irresponsible behavior or attitudes.

Considering the fact that fires are occurring at an unacceptable frequency and intensity, the Ministry reiterates our call to the public, to report any fires to the Ministry as soon as possible for swift response as well as to observe the following measures and good practices:

- Members of the public are required to use fire responsibly and advised to clear areas around their homesteads and places of residence.
- Parents must ensure that children do not light fires without supervision.
- Before starting a fire, check the surrounding to assess the risk (flammable materials, wind speed etc.) of burning beyond the intended area.

- Where required, put in place preventative measures to stop the fire from spreading to unintended places.
- Charcoal makers must take fire preventative measures when involved in charcoal making activities,
- Smokers should put out their cigarette butts completely before disposing of them,
- People using fires for domestic purposes such as cooking, heating, welding, camping et cetera, must ensure that fires are totally extinguished afterwards.
- When using fire to clear a specific area, be sure to inform relevant officials to advise including Nature conservation, forestry officials and the Namibian Police.
- Members of the public should continuously educate ourselves on the dangers caused by forest / veld fires.
- Report wildfires to forestry offices near you.

I thank you for your humble attention.