



CARGO, TRUCKS CONFISCATED OVER ILLEGAL WOOD

Francoise Steynberg

6 HOURS AGO - 2024-06-03 11:53:00

Francoise SteynbergWindhoekIn early May, the environment ministry's forestry directorate raided farms in the Kunene Region where protected mopane trees are being harvested and exported for charcoal and firewood.

Trucks carrying loads of wood and charcoal - without permits to do so - have already been seized, the directorate confirmed.

An outraged charcoal producer in the Outjo district, who preferred to remain anonymous, claimed a forestry official threatened him and demanded a bribe from him to not stop his charcoal business.

"What is your coal worth to you?" Tadius Nagangombe, the chief forestry officer for Kunene and Otjozondjupa, reportedly asked the farmer.

Ngangombe, who is based in Otjiwarongo, strongly denied the allegations and told Network Media Hub (NMH) that he was only doing his job and carrying out orders to stop the mass harvesting of protected mopane trees in the Kunene Region.

"He came with policemen who got out with AK47s and threatened me. The kilns were stopped and they wanted to confiscate axes. I asked: 'Where is the warrant?'" the farmer narrated.

"My permit was issued by the forestry directorate in April and is valid until the end of July, but they are stopping me. They drive from farm to farm with the police.

They want to confiscate everything - from our wood and coal to our tractors and trailers - and they want to arrest us. There are a lot of our workers who have disappeared since [out of fear].”

The producer said all permits for the transport and export of charcoal have been stopped and this includes those of large charcoal factories.

Commercial harvest halted

Deputy forestry director Michael //Otsub confirmed to NMH that all permits for the harvesting, transport and export of mopane have been temporarily suspended.

The ministry already stopped the commercial harvest of mopane trees in Kunene in November last year after the unsustainable harvest of this protected species was noted, he explained.

“There was consultation with the stakeholders last year and they were allowed to harvest mopane, but we have since realised that most of them have not changed [the quantities they are harvesting],” //Otsub said.

“We had to step in and stop them. There are more teams coming in so we can inspect all the farms.”

Nagangombe said forestry officers must take a police officer to farms for investigation and protection purposes.

“The farmers are angry and want to slander my name. I will never ask for or accept a bribe,” he stressed.

Both men expressed concerns about the mass destruction of mopane trees in Kunene, “especially with the majority of producers hiding behind deforestation; they just want to make money”.

According to Nagangombe, one farmer sprayed 30 hectares of mopane trees with poison.

They are also concerned about Angolan nationals working on farms without work permits and at lower wages than Namibians, they said.

Frustrated

Rian Smit, the manager of Nexus Charcoal in Outjo, confirmed that a load of charcoal on one of their trucks was confiscated because the driver didn't have the transport permit on hand. "But they were only supposed to give me a fine," he lamented.

He said mostly mopane trees grow in these regions, and they have to do deforestation.

"According to information from the Charcoal Association of Namibia (CAON), no new permits would be issued until an audit is done on farms.

"[The forestry directorate] would have done inspections on farms in December, but apparently they don't have enough staff. Now they just turn up and shut us down."

Smit added that he is frustrated because Nexus cannot get coal, "because the farms that deliver coal to us have been closed".

'Great condition'

CAON general manager Michael Degé visited farms that claim the charcoal industry is in great condition.

"We are busy bringing everything under control. I will still talk to [the forestry directorate], which did not follow the procedures. Large factories and farmers who are CAON members can export again and trucks are back on the road with transport and export permits being allowed again," he said late yesterday afternoon.

"Harvest permits for mopane trees must first be approved by the forestry director in Windhoek because it is a protected species and inspections will be carried out again on farms."

– francoise@nmh.com.na