

## **NATIONAL FOREST/VELD FIRE MANAGEMENT POLICY**

### ***Wildfires are a global, regional and national concern***

Fire is a phenomenon occurring in most vegetation zones of the world. From the boreal forests to the tropical grasslands and savannas of the world, fire consumes large quantities of plant biomass; globally over 5000 million tons of plant carbon are consumed annually due to the burning of savanna vegetation and through the use of fire in shifting agriculture. There is a growing concern of the contribution of such extensive burning to the greenhouse effect and thereby global climate change.

All SADC countries have a unifying problem of rampant wildfires and largely unmanaged fire regimes. In Southern Africa an estimated area of over 100 million hectares of tree, bush and grass savannas are burnt every year. Based on the review of the Regional Forest Fire Management System SADC-wide recommendations have been developed to improve monitoring and reporting of fires, to promote fire management, to establish cooperative arrangements between the countries and consider to lay out a strategic action plan for implementing fire management program for Southern Africa. These recommendations have, however, mostly not been implemented.

In Namibia, large areas are burnt every year. In 2001, about 5 million hectares burned in the country; Caprivi, Kavango, Otjozondjupa and Omaheke regions accounted for 2/3 of this area. These fires are a mixture of natural fires at the onset of the rainy season and anthropogenic ones set by humans during the dry season. Repeated and uncontrolled burning results in considerable economic losses through damage to wood and non-wood resources, loss of grazing land, and consequently increased mortality of livestock and wildlife as well as unwanted changes in the vegetation and occasional loss of human lives. The loss of natural resources affects detrimentally both local and national economies as well as reduces the vegetation available as carbon sinks.

Fires have, however, also positive effects to the environment. Exclusion of fire leads to a fuel build-up which, if ignited, results in high intensity fires that affect mature trees up to their canopies. In other areas, suppression of fire combined with high grazing pressure may lead to bush encroachment. Annual burning in woodlands, even at low intensity, causes damage to the regeneration of many species and prevents small trees of growing into the canopy. On the other hand, some species, including the commercially important *Pterocarpus angolensis* require fire to enable regeneration, but probably at much lower frequencies than presently is the case in Namibia's woodlands. Fire thus brings about both positive and negative effects the former of which can be increased through appropriate fire management.

### ***Previous efforts to control forest fires through policies and legislation in Namibia***

In Namibia, the colonial fire laws and guidelines were not considering the present land tenure system and agricultural practices on communal lands. The local skills and knowledge on how to prevent, control and suppress forest fires gradually faded away during the years of colonisation. In 1884, the supervision and control of burning was basically transferred from the Traditional Authorities to the Government, resulting in erosion of power on controlling fires by the Traditional Authorities. The daily supervision ceased and large-scale uncontrolled shifting cultivation and hunting using fires began in Northern Namibia.

The Forest Act of 1968 provides some procedural regulations on clearing of fire belts and rules of fire control. The Act recognized the right of the owners and occupiers of land to

clear fire belts on common boundaries, but made no provisions for communal fire management. Namibia's forest policy of 1992 had inclusions regarding fires and burning, but its directives were never enforced, which would have meant the prosecution of thousands of local farmers annually. In East Caprivi alone 10.000–15.000 fires were burning annually without any permission as prescribed by the Act of 1968.

The new Forest Act No. 12 of 2001 lays out rules on fire management. The Act and its Regulations shall provide regulations concerning fire, such as on access and connecting roads in forest reserves and on the composition, functions and procedures of fire management committees which can be set up for communal and commercial areas.

The Namibia Forestry Strategic Plan (1996) provides a framework for fire policy and management planning. The Strategic Plan is based on ecological, environmental, cultural and socio-economic considerations and regards Production, Protection and Participation as the three imperatives of forest policy. The plan underscores the need for relating the negative effect of fire by: "The occurrence and severity of uncontrolled and accidental forest fires has to be reduced, and the policy of burning off patches of woodlands to improve hunting grounds, should be changed to one using fire only as a controlled tool under specific circumstances." The Strategic Plan further recognizes the importance of participation of the local communities and the private sector in management and conservation of forest resources.

At the moment there are no statements regarding fire policies, rules or regulations under the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Rural Development. The Ministry of Regional and Local Government and Housing has produced a policy statement on bushfires, but this document is not formally endorsed by the Cabinet. It regards bushfires as emergencies or disasters and emphasises the role of Emergency Management Councils/Units at different levels of the administration (national, regional, constituency) in coordinating and implementing the efforts to increase the level of disaster preparedness, e.g. against bush fires. The document lacks clear policy statement(s) and pays limited reference to forest fires or fire management per se. It can therefore not form a basis for a national fire management policy.

### ***A novel approach: integrated forest fire management***

Due to the local and global concerns above, the Government of Namibia, with assistance from the Government of Finland has since 1996 implemented a programme on Integrated Forest Fire Management (IFFM). The pilot area was East-Caprivi, but the Programme has later been extended to Kavango and Otjozondjupa Regions. From the onset the activities have focussed on approaching and involving the rural population in fire prevention and management. This is based on extensive fire awareness campaign focusing at general public in all sectors of society; capacity building at community level through introduction of labour-intensive fire control and management technology and community mobilisation for voluntary fire prevention and suppression using gender-sensitive approach. The above programme has also regarded fire as a legitimate land management tool when used in an ecologically acceptable way. The programme has succeeded in reducing significantly the area of fires and mobilising communities in fire prevention and management. National Forest Fire Management Guidelines have also been produced for Namibia.

### ***Proposed policy design process***

The current levels of wildfire occurrence and severity are incompatible with the nation's social and resource management objectives. When wild fires continue to cause wide-spread damage to environment and property questions are raised in the public as to what are the roles of different organisations to prevent this as well as what is the policy of Namibia towards forest/veld fires. The existing policies do not adequately cover the pursuits of the Government towards controlling and managing these fires. It is also necessary to shift the present *ad hoc* response by fire fighting to the proactive mitigation and management of fires. There is also a need for common philosophy across government ministries (and other bodies) regarding fire use, sharing of responsibility for fire management and development of joint strategies. The transboundary fire issues affecting Namibia and its neighbours require a strong co-operation with the neighbouring countries, the SADC and international partners.

The Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) has been identified as the main coordinator or responsible agency within the GRN in forest/veld fire issues. The National Fire Forum has already been established under the leadership of the DoF. The MET, through the DoF feels that the country urgently requires a consolidated forest/veld fire management policy that stipulates the responsibilities of different stakeholders. Therefore a policy development process by using the following steps is proposed:

1. Review of relevant documents by a specialist. This will involve reviewing and assessing the contents of the existing policies, guidelines and other documents with reference to fire, including those of neighboring countries, as applicable. This approach is considered necessary to establish linkages between various national policies and strategies as well as existing forest/veld fire management activities and their linkages to forest/veld fire management policy formulation
2. Regional and national consultation of stakeholders. This phase is intended to collect the views and inputs from the stakeholders, such as rural representatives of commercial farming areas, community leaders in communal areas, private landowners (municipalities), government policy makers and other public bodies as well as non-governmental organisations. This phase will be implemented by means of X regional and inter-sectoral workshops in Namibia. Through broad participation the stakeholders will be involved in the decisions that will bring about the policy draft.
3. Formulation of the first draft of the policy. By using the inputs from the previous phases a first draft for a forest/veld fire management policy is prepared. Clear and measurable policy objectives and implementation strategies are needed to minimise the adverse effects of uncontrolled fires and to increase the benefits from fire prevention and from controlled use of fire. Such objectives and implementation strategies would provide for sustainable land-use practices, compatible inter-sectoral policies, joint fire management responsibilities at the community/local level, and the participation of the private sector and NGOs
4. Consultation of the key stakeholders for fine tuning of the policy draft. A national workshop will be convened for key stakeholders to appraise the policy draft.
5. Presentation of the final draft policy for consideration and approval by the Government. The feedback and proposed amendments of the national workshop will be incorporated into the final draft before submission.

**Optional:**

The National Fire Forum, established under the leadership of the DoF, will have an important role in guiding the above process in:

- overseeing and guiding the policy development;
- providing the Consultant with advise on policy related matters in their respective fields of expertise
- providing the Consultant with the relevant policy-related studies and Government documents in their respective fields
- revising the various drafts produced by the Consultant and make comments and suggestions on their contents.
- updating, as necessary, the list of issues and service providers for the policy; (the list was prepared by the Round Table in 1999)