

19. Fire Control

Explanation

The Minister of Conservation is a Rural Fire Authority under the Forest and Rural Fires Act 1977. Through the Minister, the Department is responsible for fire control on all land defined under the Act as a 'State Area'. These are all areas managed by the Department and some lands administered by the Department of Survey and Land Information under the Land Act 1948 and a one kilometre margin around these areas, the 'Fire Safety Margin'. State Area fire control responsibilities do not include the above land areas which are within a Rural or Urban Fire District as defined in the Act or the Fire Service Act. The Department administers a 'Restricted Fire Season' for all State Areas which results in some fire activities requiring a permit from the Department. The Department also has fire control responsibilities on private land as the result of agreements: Queen Elizabeth II National Trust covenants; specified conservation covenants administered by the Department; following joint agreement with other Rural Fire Authorities for specified parcels of land, which may include some land administered by the Department within urban and rural fire districts.

In recognition of the threat fire poses to life, property and conservation values, its management is a major part of Conservancy operations. The aim of fire management is in priority order to minimise the risk of wildfires to life, property, and areas managed by the Department. Fire management activities include strategic fire planning, fire prevention, the control of wildfires and any use of fire for management purposes. The Department's national policy on fires is to suppress all wildfires which are known to be burning on State Areas or any other areas where the Department has an agreement to carry out fire control. Fire detection and suppression takes priority over other Department activity (except where the other activity is concerned with a danger to life).

The Conservancy's fire control operations are undertaken in accordance with the Department's Fire Control Operations, Instructions and Guidelines and with the Conservancy's Annual Fire Action Plan using the Conservancy's Fire Maps. The Fire Action Plan shows what to do when a fire is reported, people to contact, the resources available and sets out the organisational requirements. The Department works closely with the National Rural Fire Authority, a division of the Fire Service Commission. It provides guidance to all rural fire authorities on maintaining, training and equipping a reaction force to suppress fires, and it manages a Rural Fire Fighting Fund which allows for the reimbursement of most rural fire suppression costs. All rural fire authorities must meet the National Rural Fire Management Code of Practice if they are to claim on the Rural Fire Fighting Fund. Rural fire authorities include the Department, city and district councils, the Ministry of Defence and Rural Fire Committees. The latter result from gazettal of a rural fire district and include organisations with large land holdings which have an interest in undertaking their own fire control. They may include regional councils and major forestry companies. Co-ordinating committees provide a

mechanism to make more effective and efficient the activities of the participating rural fire authorities. The Department is working towards mutual fire agreements with all other rural fire authorities and forestry companies.

Wellington Conservancy

In its role as a rural fire authority, the Conservancy maintains fire control responsibility for the State Areas within its boundaries and for other lands where it has an agreement to carry out fire control. Through agreement with the relevant rural fire committee, the Department has fire control responsibility for those lands it manages within rural fire districts. In the Conservancy there are 12 rural fire authorities and three rural fire co-ordinating committees (Wellington, Manawatu and Wairarapa). The Department has a labour force dispersed throughout the conservancy trained for fire suppression tasks and also has access to trained firefighters in the Department's Head Office. There are six volunteer rural fire fighting forces in the greater Wellington area and these are available to assist the Department. Department training is in accordance with a Conservancy fire training plan. Technical support for planning oversight and fire and radio equipment maintenance is shared with Hawke's Bay and Wanganui Conservancies by three officers based in the Department's Palmerston North Central Fire Depot.

The Conservancy has large numbers of wildfires, compared with other parts of the country. The high risk of accidental and deliberate fires occurs because of the large areas of highly flammable ground cover, e.g., gorse, long periods of high fire danger ratings (especially in the Wairarapa), proximity to large urban areas and large numbers of visitors. The Department runs a restricted fire season all year, so permits are required for fires, and may impose a total fire ban at times of peak fire risk.

Management Issues

Information

The methods used to control fires can accentuate the damage caused. Heavy machinery used to construct emergency fire breaks or access may destroy historical features such as former Maori occupation sites or water races. Chemicals used for smothering fires may affect species, in particular, indigenous fish. The Conservancy will maintain a readily accessible source of information to assist in reducing the potential side effects of fire control practices. It will introduce the awareness of the risks into training courses and establish an alert system with the tangata whenua to minimise impacts on cultural sites.

To help assess fire risk, information is also needed to identify and document patterns of fire occurrence and their relationship to factors such as topography, vegetation type and human influences. The Department will provide resources for identifying predisposing factors important for causing historical fires, and this will form a basis for identifying measures to reduce the occurrence of fires.

Fire Fighting Capability

Fire is always a risk so the Department needs to maintain the capacity to fight fires throughout the year. The key to this is trained firefighters, well-maintained and adequate equipment and a good network of volunteer fire forces and fire authorities. The Department will review its fire fighting capability to identify any weaknesses and recommend measures to remedy them.

Fire Control Priorities

The Forests and Rural Fires Act and national guidelines provide the broad fire control priorities of life, property and natural and historic resources. There is a need to establish priorities for situations where there is excessive demand on firefighting resources. Although the Department has the means of ranking the significance of land it administers, these categories have not been applied to fire situations and often apply to larger areas than those affected by wildfires. The Department will establish suitable criteria.

Fire Prevention

Preventive actions such as fire danger monitoring, selective permitting of fires, education and publicity can do much to prevent the outbreak of fire. Despite this, fires still result from irresponsible or thoughtless actions. The use of fireworks, especially skyrockets, is an annual concern. Action to prevent fire is carried out by all fire authorities and is co-ordinated by the Rural Fire Co-ordinating Committees.

Active education campaigns focusing on permitting procedures for State Areas and on encouraging visitors to use gas barbecues and similar cooking equipment, as well as more general fire prevention campaigns and publications, are important tools. They will be an important component of the Department's annual fire prevention operations. There is also a need to raise the public awareness of losses caused by fires, and of the value of gorse and young native plant communities as future native forest. The Department will emphasise the impact of fire and the value of shrubland communities. It will recommend further fire prevention measures after analysing the factors important in past fires.

Managed fires or controlled burns are used as a land management tool. When they coincide with restricted fire seasons, a permit from the relevant fire authority is required. Fire as a land management tool has significant environmental impacts that need to be evaluated on a case by case basis. It is appropriate therefore that such an activity should have controls imposed on it by the RMA. The Department will advocate to regional and local authorities for controlled burns to become subject to the resource consent process under the RMA.

The national Fire Weather Index provides an index of fire danger. It depicts the daily fire danger and provides guidance for fire permits and the initial response to any fires. It is also used to determine whether a fire ban (a prohibited fire season) needs to be declared. In order to determine fire danger throughout the Conservancy, at least six and ideally eight weather stations are necessary. The Department will contribute to a network of weather stations throughout the conservancy up to the optimum.

Fire Research

Knowledge about the behaviour of fire in New Zealand is limited. A fire research programme, undertaken by the former NZ Forest Service, has been reinstated by the NZ Forest Research Institute in Rotorua. The Department, along with the NZ Forest Owners' Association, the National Rural Fire Authority, NZ Forest Research Institute and District Councils, assists in the funding of this research. A key area is the development of the Fire Behaviour Prediction System. Once completed the system will be used to predict rate of spread, perimeter length and fire intensity. The Conservancy will provide input annually to assist Head Office in determining research needs and priorities and will help agencies engaged in rural fire research.

Objectives

- 1 Reduction of the risk of an outbreak of fire on State Areas.
- 2 Minimisation of the effect of any fire in State Areas.
- 3 Maintenance and improvement of integrated fire control capacity with other Rural Fire Authorities and the NZ Fire Service.
- 4 Education of the public on the damage caused by wildfires and on how to prevent them.

Implementation

- 1 Control and suppress fires on State Areas within the Conservancy boundaries and any other areas where the Department has an agreement to carry out fire control (first priority).
- 2 Prepare an annual Fire Action Plan in accordance with the National Rural Fire Authority guidelines.
- 3 Issue fire permits and take fire weather readings, following the Department's Fire Control Operations, Instructions and Guidelines.
- 4 Prohibit fires in any area, in consultation with adjoining fire authorities, when fire danger becomes unacceptably high.
- 5 Undertake annual fire training for all Conservancy and Head Office staff trained as firefighters in accordance with the Conservancy fire training plan. Volunteer firefighting forces will be invited to attend Department training activities.
- 6 Maintain fire equipment and radios to standards specified by the Department's Palmerston North Central Fire Depot.
- 7 Review the Department's firefighting capacity in the Conservancy to identify weakness.
- 8 Establish criteria to assist the allocation of firefighting resources for the maximum protection of conservation values during firefighting.
- 9 Review past fires to identify measures to reduce future occurrences.
- 10 Maintain and update a database of maps of land holdings, fire zones and fire safety margins.
- 11 Prepare and maintain a database of fire-related information for training, publicity campaigns and to support an 'alert system' with the tangata whenua.
- 12 Establish an 'alert system' with tangata whenua to advise them of fires at sites of cultural significance.
- 13 Contribute to a network of weather stations throughout the Conservancy.
- 14 Undertake publicity annually to educate the public on the danger of fire, its effect on natural and historic resources and recreational facilities, to reduce the risk of fire.
- 15 Advocate for regional and local authorities to subject controlled burns to the requirements of the resource consent process under the RMA.
- 16 Liaise with other fire authorities and landowners to share fire prevention and suppression information, participate in publicity, co-ordinate fire training and establish agreements for exchange of fire responsibilities.
- 17 Encourage and support volunteer fire forces.
- 18 Contribute data on fires and assist in research on fire as requested by Head Office.