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AERIAL EVIDENCE: The utter devastation caused by the rampant wildfires along the Garden Route as seen from the air. Seven people died in the blazes. Pictures courtesy of TimesLIVE and Savannah Helicopters

Garden Route inferno 'man-made'

Forensic investigation points to sources of fires that caused R5bn worth of damage

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THE devastating fires that wreaked havoc in Knysna and Plettenberg Bay in June, destroying hundreds of properties and claiming several lives, were man-made.

This is according to the findings of the official forensic investigation into the cause and origin of the fires which was released yesterday.

The total damage to properties was an estimated R5-billion.

The runaway fires in and around both Garden Route towns which eventually claimed the lives of seven people, saw the

destruction of about 700 homes and other structures, burnt through between 10 000 and 15 000 hectares, and led to the evacuation of about 5 000 people.

Efforts to deal with the fires have been described by disaster management experts as the biggest disaster rescue operation in South African history.

Knysna fire chief Clinton Manual, who conducted the fire probe, briefed the media on his findings at the town's council chambers.

Manual, who has been involved in a number of similar high-profile investigations over the past 25 years, said his investigation was based on science and he had found clear indications that both blazes – which broke out in the Elands-kraal area outside Knysna and Kruisfontein outside Plett, respectively, on June

7 – were the result of man-made fires.

This contradicts recent reports by energy specialist Wallace Vosloo who suggested they could have started as a result of underground fires caused by lightning.

Manual said he had found during his investigation clear indications that the Knysna blaze had started in a clearing where it was apparent people had made fires. They had found pine cones – likely used as fire lighters – and stacked materials like planks.

"The reason we say that the pine cones were used as fire lighters is that there are no pine trees in the area we identified as the origin," he said. "It [pine cones] was definitely brought in."

He said there was an access road to the area of origin and indications that people had been in the area, including broken pottery and other items.

The area of origin he had identified also had the traits of a typical wildfire – a V-shape – and was consistent with the wind patterns on the day.

Manual said other suggestions, like that of Vosloo, did not add up when one took into account the weather patterns and the burn scars of the fire.

These aspects were fuelled further by five other pillars, including the drought, topography, heavy fuel (vegetation), berg winds and strong winds.

He said the fire that started in Kruisfontein and led to the devastation in Plet-



SHEER DESTRUCTION: A guest house in Belvedere, Knysna which was destroyed by the flames

Picture: ESA ALEXANDEI

tenberg Bay was also likely man-made as they had found evidence of a homeless person living in the area.

The Elands-kraal fire, however, originated on a private property and the report would be handed over to the police for further investigation.

Frank Beale, 59, who lost everything when a property he rented in Roodfontein Road was engulfed in the flames, said if the perpetrators were ever identified, they must face the consequences of their actions and be "dragged" before the courts. "They [alleged culprits] almost wiped out the entire Knysna," he said.

"I lost everything in the fire. A few days

after the incident, I went back – the place was desolate."

However, Beale said hatred was worse than cancer. "We cannot go around painting everybody with the same brush."

Scott Edkins, who found the bodies of Catherine Nyirenda and her mother, Enala, said he was in Cape Town and not privy to the outcome of the investigation.

He declined to comment.

Lieschka Cox, who escaped the fire with her two daughters, a dog and a hamster, also refused to comment without first seeing the report.

Knysna municipal manager Kam Chetty, who was part of yesterday's briefing, said

they had also made estimations in terms of the monetary value of the losses.

He said that personal losses, in terms of properties, was estimated to be about R5 billion.

Infrastructure damage was just short of R500-million.

This included damage to clinics (just more than R1-million), agriculture (R40-million), human settlements (more than R60-million), water (more than R90-million), environmental damage (more than R134-million), transport and public works (about R80-million), asbestos removal (R50-million) and other damages of about R50-million.

BEFORE AND AFTER



NOTHING LEFT: Brenton-on-Sea chalets which were razed by the fires