

# SA's internationally-renowned WoF ready to assist in winter fire season

**J**UNE 1 marks the start of South Africa's winter fire season; a time when a combination of dry weather, combustible vegetation and high wind leads to an increase in wildfires.

Winter fire season can run up to November (depending on weather patterns) and includes all provinces, with the exception of the Western Cape and Southern Cape, which experience a summer fire season.

The South African government, through the Department of Environmental Affairs' internationally-renowned programme, Working on Fire (WoF), is ready and has resources mobilised around the country.

We have a national deployment team, which can be dispatched to anywhere in the country to assist farmers and land owners with fire suppression efforts.

It is anticipated that our well-trained firefighters will be instrumental in lending support to provincial disaster management authorities, fire protection associations, SANParks, private and public landowners and local municipalities during what is expected to be a difficult winter fire season because of the drought gripping many parts of the country.

In addition to ground resources, WoF will also have access to 13 Huey helicopters, 15 fixed-wing spotter planes and four fixed-wing water-bombers to provide essential aerial firefighting services.

WoF, now in its 15th year of existence, is administered through



## **GUEST SPOT** **EDNA** **MOLEWA**

the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) – and provides work opportunities, skills training and personal development, with a focus on young people and women.

Some 85% of our crews are young people, with 29% of them women – among the highest levels of gender representation of any comparable fire service in the world.

More than 5 000 young men and women are given work opportunities through this programme.

They are recruited from marginalised communities and trained in fire awareness, education, prevention and suppression skills.

During the period from April 2017 to the end of February, the WoF was called out to suppress 2 200 fires, and through these efforts, limited the damage to just over 700 000 hectares of burnt vegetation and forests.

In preparation for this winter's fire

season, just over 4 000 firefighters stationed at 160 bases throughout South Africa have undergone their Yellow Card Training (YCT) at special camps.

The YCT camps are aimed at assessing the fire-fighting teams' readiness to be deployed to the fire line. Only firefighters issued with Yellow Cards are qualified to work on the fire line during winter fire season.

The camps also focus on the mental and physical fitness of the firefighters, equipment and protective clothing inspections, the practical implementation of Integrated Fire Management Practices and strengthening teamwork.

Together with the department's other environmental programmes – Working for Water, Working for Wetland, Working for Coasts and the People and Parks programme – WoF continues to have a positive impact on not just sustainable rural development and job creation but also on climate change adaptation and building resilience, especially in rural communities.

Many of the young people who have been given work opportunities and have since passed through this programme move on to careers in the sector, or start their own business ventures.

Some have gone into careers in security, road traffic management or the SAPS, others have become environmental monitors and field rangers at our national parks.

Through this programme, the

Department of Environmental Affairs also conducts community fire awareness campaigns throughout the country to teach communities how to be #FireSafe and to prevent unwanted veld and forest fires.

Our firefighters demonstrate how to construct fire breaks and do fuel reduction, which helps eliminate fire spread in case of a fire.

As we gear up for winter fire season, the Department of Environmental Affairs urges landowners in particular to get into contact with us so that we can assist with the development of clear integrated fire management services, which includes prescribed burning, fuel load reduction, community fire awareness, early detection and fire suppression plans.

We urge communities to be more vigilant during this fire season and not to start unnecessary fires, particularly during dry days, this winter.

All South Africans have a duty to take every precaution to stop this human-made problem, and citizens should be part of the solution.

There are basic precautions. Do not start fires, particularly on windy days. Report fires immediately. Fire-proof your properties, and fire-proof your homes. Abide by the Fire Protection Association rules. Learn what to do in the event of being caught in a fire.

And, please, clear all invasive species on your land.

**Molewa** is Minister of Environmental Affairs