

High altitude teams caring for the environment

By Carin Venter



If it were possible to join all the areas invaded by alien trees in South Africa, the invaded land would cover an area equivalent to the size of the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

FarmBiz spoke to Rob McQueen, who oversees the safe and proper removal of alien plant species at high altitudes – a job that comes with more than its fair share of risk and danger. Rob is the ground operations manager for the Eastern Cape and Southern Cape in an Expanded Public Works Programme, funded by the Department of Environmental Affairs and implemented by Working on Fire.

There are about 470 participants in 43 high altitude teams (HATs), consisting of roughly 13 members each, in the country. The crews are strategically based in Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, the Western and Southern Cape as well as the Eastern Cape, from Lusikisiki to Tsitsikamma. Crew leaders report to the team operational managers, who report to regional managers.

Alien species control

Rob has been involved in the programme since they started operating in the major catchment areas of the Eastern Cape nine years ago, making breakthroughs in the control of alien trees in the province.

There are currently 126 members based in Addo National park, the Baviaanskloof, Van Stadens Wildflower Reserve, Camdeboo National Park, the indigenous forests of the Lusikisiki district and the Tsitsikamma forests.

The HATs in the Eastern Cape are used by Sanparks, Eastern Cape Parks, Nelson Mandela municipality, the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD) and private landowners who need help with the removal of alien species in mountainous areas. It is a free service because HATs are employed by the government and, as Rob puts it, it is “fighting for the sake of water”.

Teamwork equals success

Rob speaks about why they go to such great lengths to train and equip people to work on rugged, steep, and often dangerous mountainous terrain.

“Alien trees are a massive and vastly overlooked problem in the country. Most of the culprit tree species are from places such as Australia, which is a fire dependant country. These trees flourish after a fire, so we remove the fuel load that could potentially provide flammable material for a fire coming through,” he explains. They do this by cutting down the

trees and/or poisoning tree stems with herbicides before removing the wood.

The HATs work mainly in the mountains, while there are other teams, like Working for Water, who work in lower-lying areas on level ground. “We complement each other, working hand in hand to ensure that areas which have been cleared, don’t get re-infested with trees dropping seeds from the top of a mountain.”

By using twin rope techniques to access alien trees and plants over cliffs and steep angles, HATs target mainly, but not solely, black wattle, blackwood, pine and



An area where alien vegetation has been successfully treated and cleared by the team.