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Pilot project to limit the spread of fires

The City of Cape Town, in partnership with Mandoval Vermiculite Pty Ltd, has launched a pilot project to limit the spread of fires in informal settlements.

The project was launched at Overcome Heights informal settlement on Tuesday 11 July, when the first 10 structures were coated in a fire-retardant substance.

JP Smith, the Mayco member for safety and security, said 300 informal structures will be coated in vermiculite over the next six months.

"The City is working hard at keeping the deaths and property destruction from informal settlements down. We don't want people to be the victim of fires where it affects their property or worse, where it causes the loss of life. In the last week, we again had the needless loss of life relating to informal settlement fires."

He added the private company Mandoval Vermiculite Pty Ltd first demonstrated its product during a simulation at the Epping Fire Station in 2021.

"We tested this at the Epping Fire Station, built a number of structures that we covered with vermiculite and they survived 25% longer than the structures not covered. Other structures will burn down if there is a strong wind in four or 10 minutes, collapsing and beyond redemption. With vermiculite, you can put a blow torch against it and it would stand.

"The pilot project in Overcome Heights will see the company provide funding for the product, machinery and training, while Disaster Risk Management will fund employment of 11 people from the local community through the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP)."

Smith added that Overcome Heights was chosen due to its high potential for large-scale fire incidents

"This year, so far, has seen eight fires in the area. In 2022 20 fires were recorded and in 2021 10."

Should this pilot project prove successful it is hoped funding could be secured by Informal Settlements Management in the Human Settlements department, from public or private channels, to fund similar projects elsewhere. Smith said the City had tried various methods to limit the spread of fires, including smoke detectors, types of paint, fire blankets and buckets with sand.

"All these have a common problem; where to find the money to extend it to 600 000 informal structures."

Jason Coleman, Finance Director at Erakis Investments Pty Ltd, said when applied the product Tekrok, a cement material mixed with vermiculite, has fire protection qualities. "We can basically contain a fire for three or four hours in any structure and stop it from spreading anywhere else. The main use for Tekrok is in petrochemical facilities. In a chevron facility all steel structures need protection and petrochemical fires typically burn from 0 to 1 000 °C in a couple of seconds and steel melts at 600 °C. The idea is that we put this 40 ml layer around the steel structure, stopping it from overheating and melting, so the stability of the structure remains."

He said the idea came about to develop a product for informal settlements.

"If we covered informal settlements and structures with a product with the same ideas as those found at petrochemical facilities we can spray it on a little thinner, as at a petrochemical plant, providing the same protection level." The cost to cover just one structure, depending on size, is R4 000 to R6 000."