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Firefighting at several municipalities has been severely hampered

By GILL GIFFORD

● Hundreds of fire trucks once operated by Working on Fire (Wof) before being handed over to the government to be distributed to municipalities, have been standing idle at depots around the country – some for two years.

Meanwhile, firefighting operations at many municipalities have almost ground to a halt due to a lack of fire trucks and other firefighting resources.

While a new, smaller, replacement fleet fitted with the latest equipment is now being used by Wof, the older fleet has been left to fall into disrepair. Some vehicles have been parked at the depots for as long as two years.

Wof is a government-funded programme that started in 2003 as part of the expanded public works programme – aimed at training unemployed youths between the ages of 18 and 35.

Over the past 20 years it has grown from 850 participants to 5,300.

Nine years ago, Wof paired up with Kishugu – a company specialising in integrated fire management services – and they were given a seven-year contract to build a fleet of 278 4x4 fire trucks and crew buses.

The vehicles (mostly former military trucks) were procured by Kishugu and adapted for firefighting purposes. The fleet was operated, maintained and licensed by Wof on the understanding that the vehicles would revert to the state when the contract expired.

The department of forestry, fisheries & the environment began taking ownership of the vehicles at the end of 2021, and in January 2023 signed a new five-year contract with the Wof-Kishugu joint venture. However, building the new fleet took almost two years, with the last of the 212 new vehicles completed at the end of last year, said Kishugu's Coenle Lamprecht.

Meanwhile, the old fleet – except for two vehicles – has been given to the department. Many of the trucks have allegedly been stripped of batteries, tyres and the specialist equipment they were fitted with.

The department's spokesperson, Peter Mbelengwa, did not respond to questions this week.

Wof MD Trevor Abrahams said the group had asked the department if it could buy back the old fleet, or at least lease and manage the old trucks, but it refused. He said the department responded that it intended to distribute the vehicles to district municipalities for use at their own fire stations or by fire protection associations (FPAs) – voluntary community fire management organisations.

Erich Thabo Stoch of the North West Umbrella Fire Protection Association, which represents 20 FPAs, described the situation as "gross negligence bordering on criminal intent" and called for an investigation by the National Prosecuting Authority.

"At the end of 2022 we had 10 [Wof] vehicles in the province and the fire situation was improving. Then, in October 2023, the department came and removed all those vehicles ... We offered to manage and maintain the vehicles at zero cost to them, but they refused," Stoch said.

As a result, rapid response capabilities were reduced and disaster readiness was compromised, while the 2025 projection "suggests potentially catastrophic fire conditions".

Willem Crause of the Modimolle FPA in Limpopo said his team was struggling with the new arrangement as the three old Wof trucks had been replaced by three new buses, which were incapable of performing at the level of the old trucks.

# Fire trucks stand idle as fire season approaches

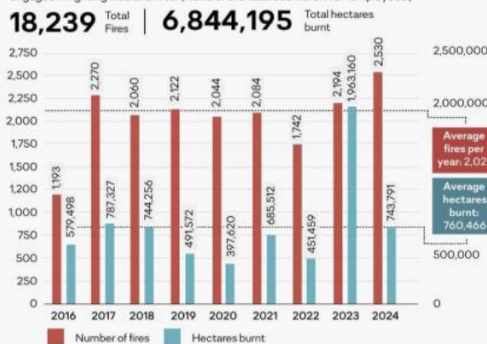


Fire trucks headed to the forestry, fisheries & the environment department by Working on Fire are parked at provincial government premises in Bhisho, Eastern Cape. Pictures: Randell Roskrige, Eugene Coetzee

## Fires attended by WoF in SA

2016 to 2024 as of December 31 2024

Last year was the worst wildland fire season in the past decade with Working on Fire (Wof) responding to 2,530 fires. In 2024 alone 35 people died in wildland fires, 18 of whom were engaged in fighting wildland fires. (None of the fatalities were Wof employees.)



Graphic: Noto Moma/SundayTimes Source: Wof

"We have been allocated six of the old vehicles that have been standing since last year. Apparently we are going to be given them under an agreement, but for now they are standing there, nothing has happened and there's no time frame," he said.

Simon Thomas, GM of the KwaZulu-Natal FPA, said he did not know what to expect, but the association was "fine for the moment as we have had a lot of rain and it's not yet fire season".

He said the old Wof fleet vehicles "have been taken away and are sitting in storage, the licences are expired, they're overgrown and unusable".

He had a good relationship with the department in the province and was aware of plans to bring the vehicles out of storage and distribute them to disaster management.

"But it's a government process, it's very slow and there's a lot of red tape. We are just hoping to have the big yellow trucks back by June ... when the fires start."

However, according to Kishugu's Lamprecht, the cost of managing, maintaining

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Willem Crause of the Modimolle FPA

and licensing such heavy-duty vehicles was considerable, while it was common knowledge that municipalities were not managing to properly staff and resource their fire stations.



Some of the fire trucks are being stored at the South End fire station in Gqeberha.



Some of the fire vehicles being stored at the department of community safety in Bhisho are in a poor state.

"We are talking about expensive vehicles. One tyre is R28,000 and there are eight on a truck that costs R37,000 a year to license. I've not seen it, but we have heard that the trucks are not being looked after and the batteries, tyres and radios have been stolen. It's a sad scenario. Hopefully [the department] has a proper plan and budget to sort this out because the benefit of these assets – if properly applied to the industry – is huge."

Lamprecht said the new fleet, which had taken two years to build, was made up of 212 brand-new Hino and Isuzu trucks, bakkies and strike units fitted with upgraded pumps (allowing for the mixing in of foam to increase water capacity), updated technology and up-to-date equipment. This is 66 vehicles fewer than the old fleet.

Municipal governance expert Harlan Cloete of the University of the Free State, who is also the founder of the *Great Governance ZA* podcast, said the situation showed a lack of co-ordination and a failure to manage risk.

"If you have a contract that is going to expire in seven years, by year five you should know what is going to happen. You can't just wait for it to end – that's poor planning. And if you are going to give a new five-year contract out, you need to start building that new fleet before it starts," Cloete said.

Earlier this week, the *Sowetan* quoted Johannesburg emergency services spokesperson Robert Malaudzi as saying the city had a dire shortage of fire trucks, with the metro's 30 fire stations having to share 15 fire engines to respond to emergencies.