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Working on Fire firefighters down tools over wages

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Firefighters employed under the Working on Fire programme have downed tools, demanding better pay, improved safety measures and permanent employment.

The workers, employed through the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), operate across uMzinyathi and other rural areas and say they will not return to work until their concerns are addressed.

Working on Fire crews are responsible for combating wildfires, protecting infrastructure and carrying out environmental management duties — including clearing bush, creating firebreaks, protecting schools and traditional courts, and removing invasive alien plants.

Workers argue that the job's risks are not reflected in their salaries, with many earning about R3 000 a month. Several claim they have not received complete personal protective equipment (PPE) this year, while others say their gear is damaged or outdated.

Ayanda Buthelezi, based in Nkandla, said he still lacks protective trousers despite regularly working in mountainous terrain with dangerous equipment. Workers are calling for wages to rise to at least R5 000 a month, saying transport and accommodation costs leave them struggling to afford basic necessities.

Some workers claim they have raised concerns with the Departments of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, as well as Employment and Labour, but have yet



Working on Fire (WOF) firefighters in training. **PHOTO: SUPPLIED**

to receive satisfactory responses.

Working on Fire service provider Kishugu Joint Venture said it employs 4 432 EPWP participants across 212 bases nationally. Spokesperson Linton Rensburg said firefighters perform a range of duties, including fire suppression, firebreak preparation and community awareness campaigns, and maintained that all firefighters receive the required protective equipment before deployment.

Department spokesperson Zolile Nqayi confirmed that PPE compliance issues had been identified.

"The service provider has been issued with a notice of non-compliance and has been given 30 working days to rectify PPE-related issues," she said.

Nqayi said regular health and safety audits are conducted and that wages paid under the programme exceed the minimum EPWP rates prescribed by law.