

CAMPHILL FIRE - PROGRESS REPORT

The process of tackling the smouldering underground fires in sections of the Onrus River peat wetland area, which is situated on the property of the Camphill School and Farm Community, has finally begun.

Characterised as the only remaining piece of palmiet vegetation wetland, this peat land is of considerable ecological importance since it plays a critical role in the functioning of the Onrus River and the Onrus Estuary and must, therefore, be protected. The peat land covers an extensive area of 33 hectares and is estimated to be 12 000 years old.

The sub-surface fire is burning in a 9 hectare area which is covered with invasive alien species and is eroded. This section of the Onrus River has been burning since 11 January 2019.

Because of the intensity of the fire, it is practically impossible to douse it in a conventional manner.

Unfortunately, the recent rains have not had an effect in filling up the water table, which is what is needed to extinguish the fires. Interesting to note is that the previous time the peat land burnt, it took eight months, without intervention, before the fire was extinguished by a wet rainy season.

Temperatures towards the centre have been recorded at 330°C.

The depth of the fire varies because of the eroded state of that part of the wetland: One of the peat ore sites measured heat at 3.9 m under the ground. In some parts, the peat is 7.25 m deep, although it is even deeper in the central channel.

In addition, the ground is fractured into honeycomb cracks through which strong smelling gas consisting of sulphates, carbon dioxide and methane emanating from these hot spots is seeping. The fire is creating a substantial amount of smoke that is affecting the air quality in the area significantly and has a detrimental effect on the health of individuals within the community and the school, necessitating the temporary relocation of the learners to alternative accommodation. (The learners are still not able to move back to the farm, and the school is accommodated in the Fernkloof Nature Reserve hall.)

The solution

- In a joint effort between Overstrand Municipality, the Department of Environmental Affairs, the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Working on Fire (WoF), Rob Erasmus (a wildfire investigator), landowners, the Breede-Gouritz Catchment Management Agency and various other experts from across the country, it was agreed that a Working on Fire team, consisting of 25 members, will set up a base camp at Camphill farm and use the unique SPIKE TOOL developed in Indonesia.
- Focusing on an area of 800 m², a series of nine holes per square metre will be drilled with the intention to flood the fire from the bottom up.
- The WoF team will be working seven days a week, and it is anticipated that they will need at least three months to fully extinguish the fire.

We urge the public to please avoid the area. This challenging fire has resulted in the ground becoming soft and unstable, and there are places where it simply sinks away. Motorists are also advised not to stop along the road to watch the WoF team at work.