

# Gas and smoke still a threat to

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## Camphill School

Writer

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Nearly four months after devastating fires raged through several communities in the Overstrand, most people have shaken themselves free of the ash and begun to rebuild their lives. Not so Camphill School in the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley. After the miraculous survival of most of the buildings and the euphoria which followed, gradually another more sinister threat emerged. The fire had not been extinguished; it had gone underground and continued to smoulder.

This had two disastrous effects: it was located in an unique palmiet wetland in and adjacent to the Onrus riverbed and if destroyed, it would have a devastating impact on the ecology of the region, including the quality of the water flowing into the estuary; and secondly, the smothering clouds of smoke and toxic gases emitted from the smoulder made it impossible from a health point of view, for the pupils and staff to return to the school.

In the intervening months, environmental, wetland and fire-fighting specialists at municipal, provincial and national level have conducted numerous on-site tests and investigated a variety of options for the satisfactory resolution of the problem. Because of the extraordinarily high ground temperature, it became clear that this would be both a complicated and very dangerous intervention. While they were searching for an answer to this problem, urgent steps needed to be taken to prevent it from spreading either up or down the river system and destroying even more of the wetland.

the fire. According to Liezl de Villiers of the Environmental Section of the municipality, this organisation has been contracted for an estimated 50 days to complete the task. They will be using a technique never used in this country before, although it was developed by South African fire specialist Martin Bolton. It has been applied with success overseas, but it is not an exact science and it is difficult to know how long the process will take under these specific conditions. It is also impossible to know what fumes will be released once they start probing below the surface.

Thermal imaging was done on site last week, but the comparative analysis against previous images is not yet available. However, it would appear that the news is not good. Apparently, the wetland could have been destroyed to a depth of about 4 metres (a possible exacerbation of damage caused by earlier fires). From visual observation, it would also seem that thanks to measures the experts took earlier, the fire has been prevented from spreading up or down the river, but it does seem to have spread sideways and now covers an area of about 9 ha.

Liezl makes the point that the most urgent need is to douse the fire, so that Camphill School can safely re-occupy its premises, but after that, the critically important and time-consuming process of rehabilitating the wetland will have to begin. Although the municipality and Working on Fire are managing the fire fighting exercise, when it comes to the rehabilitation process, there are many more players in the game – from the landowners, wetland and environmental specialists, to government departments at national, provincial and local levels.