

# Firefighters on high alert as heat and drought fan runaway veldfires



Firefighters are on high alert as natural disasters continue to fan runaway veld fires. Photo supplied

**Lizzy Bapela**

Firefighters from Working on Fire have been hard at work during the past two months as its firefighters were busy fighting multiple fires across the country. In Limpopo alone, fewer than 100 firefighters provided fire suppression services battling five “intense” veld fires throughout the province since the beginning of this year (2016).

About 600 firefighters from Working on Fire in Limpopo are on alert to respond to the veld fires that may occur in the province. WoF Limpopo Provincial Spokesperson Matema Gwangwa said that the agency has also recruited two additional regional managers to add to the current three, which means all regions in the province have their own regional manager. She added that two teams in the province

are also on standby to be deployed to the Western Cape, should there be a request for assistance.

“As a result of the current drought experienced throughout the country coupled with high temperatures we have had unusual fire activities in the province. 2015’s fire season has been one of the worst and the busiest, and we have experienced the biggest fires in the Waterberg District. Though the number of fires in the province has reduced, the damage caused by the wild fires in the province has been the biggest. In one fire more than 80 000 hectares were lost to these fires,” said Gwangwa.

WoF’s fire awareness department has started with fire awareness campaigns and workshops, where they are targeting the areas which were mostly affected by the fires in 2015. Gwangwa further said that the agency draws their firefighters from the poorest of the poor. They go through extensive training and are

characterized by their fitness, discipline and exceptional work ethic and bravery. Many of these firefighters who spend days and nights on end fighting these fires come from the impoverished communities.

“Thanks to their employment in the Working on Fire programme as an extension of the government’s Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), they have been given a work opportunity to earn a living and to put food on the table for their families,” said Gwangwa.

Working on Fire is a national veld and forest fire fighting resource operating under the auspices of the Department of Environmental Affairs and it has close to 5000 firefighters based at 200 bases throughout the country. The programme provides veld fire suppression support to the provinces, Disaster Management Centres, Fire Protection Associations and landowners such as South African National Parks and Cape Nature.