

# The year gets off to a fiery start

JANINE VAN DER RIET-NEETHLING

The resources of firefighters in the Overstrand area were stretched beyond capacity since the beginning of the new year, with nine fires reported, some of them flaming four metres high in inaccessible mountain areas.

On Monday 11 January alone, Overstrand Fire and Rescue, together with other emergency crews, had their hands full with seven fires starting just within hours of each other.

The first fire was at 11:00 in Gansbaai, with three different places set alight.

According to Lester Smith, Chief Fire & Rescue and Disaster Management Officer, firefighters managed to bring this fire under control within an hour.

"At 12:30, another fire was reported in Kleinmond, but was also brought under control quickly," Smith said. "At 14:00, a fire was reported at Baardskeerdersbos where assistance was called in from Overberg District Municipality and aerial support requested. No property was damaged."

An hour later, a fire was reported at Swartdam Road in Hermanus, which was brought under control within an hour. A fire was also reported just before 22:00 in Hawston, also under control within the hour.

While firefighters were kept busy on Monday, other firefighting crews were still fighting flames which had flared between Stanford and Gansbaai on Friday 8 January.

This fire spread quickly and, at the time of going to print on Wednesday, the fire was still not totally under control.

"The Stanford fire is extremely difficult to contain due to the fuel load, weather conditions and limited vehicle access to the fire through the thick bush," said Smith. "Overstrand Fire Department and Overberg District Municipality responded to the fire and was assisted by ground teams from Working on Fire, Cape Nature and Volunteer Wildfire Services."

With a strong south-easterly wind behind the fire, it managed to spread across the R43, which had to be closed to traffic for brief periods.

Firefighting efforts were concentrated on

the flanks of the fire to ensure it did not spread towards Gansbaai or Stanford while advancing towards the ocean.

Aerial resources were deployed several times to protect houses, farms and infrastructure in the area.

By the fifth day, the fire entered the Walker Bay Nature Reserve where firefighters are currently working to contain the fire in more favourable conditions.

"We still have six vehicles on the scene from Overstrand Municipality with 12 crew, Cape Nature and two Working on Fire teams with 36 members from Walker Bay busy with active fire fighting," Smith said yesterday.

The cause of this fire is being investigated.

In another fire, above Kidbrooke Retirement Village in Chanteclair, Onrus just after New Year's Eve, visitors and residents woke up to the powerful sound of an Oryx helicopter at around 06:30.

The probable cause of the fire in Onrus was a flare (spotted by many residents) due to new year's eve festive celebrations.

The Fire, Rescue and Disaster Management Unit initially responded with Bush Unit 10 and one Major Pump.

"Due to the location of the fire," Smith pointed out, "Overstrand firefighters had to walk up the mountain to the base of the fire with only hand tools, as the area was inaccessible to vehicles and no water could be used on the fire initially."

"On arrival at the fire line, the flame height was approximately four metres high and firefighters could not manage to bring the line under control."

The fire spread towards homes in Chanteclair and additional resources were brought in from Gansbaai and Kleinmond stations and from Overberg District Municipality. Aerial support was also immediately put on standby for first light as well as extra ground teams.

At approximately 03:00 the fire spread towards property at Leopard Rock and all vehicles and personnel were committed to ensuring no property was damaged by the fire.

Due to the fire burning out of control and regular wind direction change, Kidbrooke frail care was also evacuated to the hospital as well as the NG church in Onrus as a precautionary measure with the help of EMS, EMR

and Overstrand Law Enforcement and Traffic Services and Hermanus SAPS.

On the scene were 20 firefighters with six vehicles doing their utmost to ensure the property was not damaged, managing to keep the fire away until aerial support arrived at 06:25. Aerial support continued assisting firefighters to contain the fire.

The fire line was brought under control at 12:30, and fire crews proceeded with mop-up operations. The fire was declared safe on Saturday 2 January at 17:00.

"The Overstrand community has once again proved to be highly supportive and generous," said Smith. "Thank you to all those individuals and companies who have kept the firefighting teams fed and hydrated, providing much-needed resources to the Fire department."

"A special thank you to the Greater Over-

berg Fire Protection Association, the landowners who made their resources available and the Stanford community for refreshments for the Stanford fire and other fires in the area. Donations can be delivered at the Fire Station in Hermanus."

## FIRE FACTS:

■ From 1 November 2015 until 12 January 2016, 212 fires were reported in the Overstrand.

■ Calls reporting fires have increased compared to previous years.

■ About 1 000 hectare burnt since 1 January this year.

■ Costs per helicopter: R24 000 per hour; costs per spotter plain R3 500 per hour; per ground team depends on the number of hours but they usually work in 12 hour shifts costing R9 800.



Shortly after a New Year's Eve flare, spotted by many residents, set the bush behind Kidbrooke alight, the fire raged out of control.

PHOTO: WOLF BARTH



The helicopter dousing the embers on New Year's Day, above Kidbrooke Retirement Village. PHOTO: PEET GEYSER



To douse the fire in Stanford the helicopter pilot filled his bucket at the Willem Appel dam.

PHOTO'S: OLIVIA DICKSON



Smoke seen from the streets of Stanford.



The fire raging out of control. PHOTO: MANUS NEETHLING

Onlookers watching as the helicopter pilot scoops water from the Onrus lagoon. PHOTO: DR MARTIN BRIGGS