



MEDIA RELEASE

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EMBARGO: Immediate

Arsonists keep fire department busy

The Knysna Fire Department responded to, in the region of, 50 separate fires since Thursday, December 1.

“We have responded to 14 separate fires; however this does not include the ones where we have no official incident log, but were attended to as ‘hit and run’ operations’. Should one add those, and where the helicopter had to throw a quick bucket or two of water onto fires, it then tallies up closer to approximately 50 separate fires,” said Knysna Acting Municipal Manager, Bevan Ellman.

According to Ellman all the fires were deliberately started. “While our Fire Chief [Clinton Manuel] had the Spotter Plane and two helicopters flying, the pilots could see youngsters starting fires and then running off. Many residents also reported seeing children starting these fires,” he said.

The rate with which these young arsonists were lighting the fires necessitated the Fire Chief to call on Eden District and Bitou Municipalities, Working on Fire (WOF), Mountain to Forest (MTO), two helicopters and a fixed wing bomber plane and all off-duty firefighters to assist.

On Monday, December 5, two fires were responded to in Hornlee and Concordia areas and Ellman added: “All the fires were and still are confined to the Hornlee and Northern areas.”

In an effort to stop the arsonists, the SAPS and Municipal Law Enforcement officers were called to display visibility in the areas. Private Security companies and neighbourhood watches were also asked to be on the lookout for those deliberately starting the fires.

Unfortunately no one has yet been caught. “These young arsonists run off as soon as the fires are lit. A member of the public commented that it is the very same youngsters who return to assist the firefighters who are busy putting out their lit fires,” said an exasperated Ellman.

On Friday, December 2 the helicopters were grounded after the pilots informed the Fire Chief that the children were running under the water buckets once the water was released. “This is extremely dangerous! There are many loose items lying in the veld and the downdraft created by these helicopters is of such a force that it can easily propel these items with a force capable of decapitating someone,” explained Ellman.

He added that the helicopters accelerate after dropping the water which creates an even stronger downdraft – and this is the exact moment when the children would run under the

dropping water. "It also became clear that the children light the fires to see the helicopters dumping water and to run under this shower of water. Our Fire Chief stopped the operation because of a safety risk for the pilots of these aircraft."

Ellman urges all parents to inform their youngsters of the dangers of running under these low flying helicopters. "Serious injury or death is a consequence of this madness. Even if a small twig is propelled into an eye then the eye will be lost. Firefighters wear protective clothing when working around these aircraft. They understand the dangers associated and always take evasive action when they come in to drop water – and they never work directly under them!"

These young arsonists must be warned of the dangers of fire by their parents. "Fires have been lit very close to houses and we are fortunate that these were stopped before they could quickly spread and engulfed a house. This danger was purely diverted because of the expertise of our fire crews. The smoke being generated by these fires is harmful to the young, the elderly and those with respiratory conditions such as asthma. Prolonged exposure to the smoke and soot will also lead to respiratory complications later on in life."

In closing Ellman reiterated that parents must educate their children. Not only about the danger of fires, but also about the vast amounts of drinkable water that is being wasted to fight these deliberately set fires.

"Then there is also the problem of the fire department being unable to attend to other accidental fires, or motor vehicles accidents. Lots of property and lives can be lost by this action of lighting fires for the fun of it. Be aware that we have a municipal by-law under which perpetrators can be arrested and prosecuted for deliberately setting fires."

ENDS

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