



# THE KNYSNA FIRES

## 12 Days of Service

Young men and women from the Department of Environmental Affairs' Working on Fire - this is their story



Environmental Affairs  
Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries  
Co-operative Governance  
Water and Sanitation



**EXPANDED PUBLIC WORKS PROGRAMME**  
Creating opportunities towards human fulfillment



A firefighter in full gear is working in a smoky, wooded area. The firefighter is wearing a helmet, a jacket, and pants, and is holding a hose. The background is filled with smoke and the silhouettes of trees.

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**SOMETIMES NATURAL FORCES CONSPIRE TO CAUSE DISASTERS. ON 7 JUNE 2017, WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN A RUN-OF-THE-MILL VELD FIRE UNDER MORE BENIGN CONDITIONS BECAME A RUNAWAY CONFLAGRATION WITHIN HOURS, DESTROYING EVERYTHING IN ITS WAKE OVER A WIDE FRONT AND STRETCHING THE LIMITS OF AVAILABLE FIREFIGHTING RESOURCES TO NEAR BREAKING POINT.**

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# FOREWORD BY MINISTER OF ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS, DR EDNA MOLEWA

**THIS PUBLICATION** is a testament to the spirit of *ubuntu* that saw many South Africans mobilise to help fight the devastating multiple wildfires that engulfed parts of the Southern Cape, including the coastal town of Knysna, and the Tsitsikamma region of the Eastern Cape, during June 2017.

The Knysna Fire caused devastation and destruction on a scale that had never been experienced within a local municipality in this country and sadly led to loss of life and the destruction of properties and bulk service infrastructure worth millions of rands.

One year later, we pay tribute to the brave men and women who played an instrumental role in assisting the people of Knysna and the Tsitsikamma region.

The national Department of Environmental Affairs' Working on Fire programme played a pivotal role in fighting these fires, in what became one of the largest deployments of local and national firefighting and humanitarian resources to a single incident in South Africa. Our ground and aerial teams comprised by far the largest contingent of the fire suppression operation.

WOF firefighters were deployed from provinces such as Mpumalanga, North West, Free

State, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal to bolster local firefighting resources. Many of these firefighters, who spent days and nights on end fighting the fires, hailed from impoverished communities throughout South Africa.

Thanks to Working on Fire, a government-funded Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) focusing on fire management, they were given opportunities to earn a living and put food on the table. In return, they have made an essential contribution towards reducing damage caused by devastating wildfires.

With its motto, 'Restoring Dignity, Saving Lives, Protecting the Environment', this programme has, since its inception in 2003, worked with marginalised communities around fire awareness and education as well as prevention and fire suppression.

Having visited Knysna myself to meet with our firefighters in June 2017, I am extremely proud of the role they played. The people of the region and indeed the country owe them an immense debt. It is my hope that we will continue to offer more opportunities through this world-class programme to our people – especially our young people and women – to conserve the environment, improve their skills and develop their communities.



## MESSAGE FROM THE MANAGING DIRECTOR OF WORKING ON FIRE, TREVOR ABRAHAMS

**THE KNYSNA FIRES IN JUNE 2017** cut a path of devastation which resulted in the largest number of buildings destroyed by fire ever in South Africa and the tragic loss of seven lives, including four people engaged in firefighting.

These fires were not typical for this time of the year. The scale and ferocity of the fires signalled the negative impact of climate change, which will increasingly become part of our daily lives. Combined with the protracted drought in the region, the resultant firestorm rapidly outstripped local firefighting capacity.

However, the Working on Fire (WOF) teams in the Western Cape had already been placed on high alert in anticipation of a mega-storm, the worst expected in 30 years, which was due to make landfall in the Western Cape on 6 June 2017. The young men and women of WOF rose to the challenge and descended on the Knysna-Plettenberg Bay-Tsitsikamma area to play a pivotal role in containing and suppressing the beast. WOF aerial resources in the form of AT-802 water bombers, Huey helicopters and spotter aircraft were the key in the battle to tame the inferno.

Our ability to draw on personnel from WOF bases in other provinces, including North West, Gauteng, Free State and Eastern Cape, was also critical. We benefitted from the civic spirit of airlines which offered free flights to ferry firefighters to the battle in the Southern Cape. The



overall effort in combatting these fires bore testimony to the effective manner in which a range of municipal, private, fire protection association and WOF resources were coordinated through an Incident Command Centre.

We are rightfully proud of the contribution that WOF made in suppressing the Knysna fires. We greatly appreciated the outpouring of public donations in the form of food supplies during this operation. We particularly wish to thank the mayor and residents of Knysna for their fitting acknowledgement of these young South Africans' bravery and dedication in their enthusiastic response to our march through the streets on Saturday, 17 June 2018.

As one of the government's flagship Expanded Public Works Programmes, Working on Fire will be ready to respond in the event of such fire disasters in the future.



# HISTORY WILL KNOW IT AS THE GREAT FIRE OF KNYSNA

**SOMETIMES NATURAL FORCES** conspire to cause disasters. On 7 June 2017, what might have been a run-of-the-mill veld fire under more benign conditions became a runaway conflagration within hours, destroying much in its wake over a wide front and stretching the limits of available firefighting resources to near breaking point.



The Knysna fires took place in the context of the Western and Southern Cape braced for what was described as the worst storm experienced in 30 years. The resultant winds (more than 90km/h) in the Knysna area on 7 June 2017 were so extreme that the Working on Fire Huey helicopter water bomber based at George could not take off in the early phase of the Knysna fires.

The drought conditions had created a tinderbox of moribund and dried-out vegetation in the Greater Knysna area, including large swathes of dry alien vegetation, which all contributed towards a volatile environment for the outbreak of an uncontrollable wildfire. Combined with high temperatures and strong berg winds, it only needed a tiny flame to start a firestorm.

Just before 11am on 7 June 2017, Working on Fire received a fire call and dispatched the Riversdale Team to a fire which broke out in Elandskraal, between Sedgefield and Karatara in Knysna.

As gale force winds fanned the flames, it became clear not only that this would be no ordinary fire, but that local resources would not cope on their own. Luckily, in Working on Fire South Africa had a large firefighting force at hand, well trained, well equipped, and with tried and tested rapid aerial and ground deployment capabilities.

Following the initial deployment of the Working on Fire Riversdale Team, at the peak of the

Knysna fire Working on Fire had dispatched 485 firefighters, 12 management members, 12 light delivery vehicles, 11 fire trucks, six crew buses, four Huey helicopters, four fixed-wing spotter planes and two Air Tractor AT-802 water bombers, providing firefighting services to the Knysna and Plettenberg Bay fires.

At the same time, fires were also burning in the Tsitsikamma region of the Eastern Cape and here Working on Fire dispatched an additional 300 firefighters and 15 members of management to help with fire suppression efforts.

Working on Fire supplied the bulk of the resources deployed at these fires and was widely acknowledged as playing a fundamental role in combatting these fires. Working on Fire buses also played an important role in the evacuation efforts when the decision was made to evacuate the town of Knysna.



This deployment of Working on Fire resources, together with local, district and provincial firefighting resources and volunteers from the Volunteer Wildfire Services (VWS), became the largest deployment to a single fire incident in South African history. The speed of deployment undoubtedly made a significant contribution to saving lives and property in this battle.

The Working on Fire Riversdale Team also responded to a call by the Southern Cape Fire Protection Association to assist with evacuation operations in the Buffalo Bay (Buffelsbaai) area. They used their fire truck (FT) to evacuate residents from Goukamma and relocate them to the Buffalo Bay Restaurant near the beach, which was the nearest safe assembly point.



## Honour Roll

**THE KNYSNA FIRES** tragically took the lives of seven people.

Eight-months pregnant Madre Johnston, her husband Tony and son Michael, who turned three on that day, died on the first day.

Malawaian Blessing Nyirenda, a resident of Sedgefield, lost his three-year-old daughter Catherine and wife Enala. Their remains were repatriated to Malawi with the help of donations from many citizens.

Twenty-four-old volunteer firefighter Bradley Richards died when he and his friend Ian Barnard were trapped in a fire in Harkerville Forest near Plettenberg Bay. Barnard survived severe burn injuries.

Sixty-three-year-old John Blaauw, an employee of MTO Forestry, died during firefighting efforts in Concordia. His younger brother Merwin heroically continued fighting the fire the next day.





Describing the conditions, Riversdale Base Manager James de Kela says, “When we came through to Buffalo Bay, the flames were so high along the road and the heat was unbearable.

“We assisted EMS and ER24 transporting residents, ensuring their vehicles followed a safe route, and brought disabled residents safely to the assembly point. While the area was engulfed in flames we used the water we had in the tank on the FT to douse the flames that came over the hill. We also stationed firefighters at various points to protect homes along the beach front.”

Ground Operations Manager, Ray-yaan Majiet, instructed all Regional Managers to set up camp at the Knysna High Sportsfield from where teams could easily be dispatched. The fire suppression effort was greatly assisted by the facilities allocated to teams at the Knysna School Sports Grounds and Stadium and the tents provided by the Knysna Oyster Festival organisers to serve as sleeping quarters for the firefighters, a dining hall and one tent for receiving donations.

As the fire progressed more teams were brought in and joined with forces from municipalities such as Cape Winelands, Eden, Drakenstein and the City of Cape Town, and contracted firefighters from SANParks. What started as a small camp soon turned into a multi-agency base that was difficult to manage at first. A full Incident Command Structure was put in place and setting up of the base unfolded rapidly, with WOF involved in deploying tents, communications, meals and other logistics, dispatch of equipment and personnel, and coordination, with health & safety talks added for good measure.

The Gift of the Givers Foundation, an organisation with vast experience in emergency response and relief work, began providing food, supplying close to 500 firefighters with three meals per day. The general public and businesses also responded magnificently. As donations flooded in, our firefighters were supplied with adequate food and water to sustain them on the fire line.

After being grounded by strong winds on the first day, conditions on the second allowed the deployment of aerial forces. Battling wind, poor visibility and long hours, Working on Fire pilots were frankly magnificent, managing to make 1 900 critical water drops over the most ravaged areas during the Knysna fires. Their untiring efforts saved countless lives and homes.

Pilots from the South African Airforce provided additional aerial firefighting support and their Oryx helicopters made 878 water drops in support of the Working on Fire aerial firefighting operations.

The response on the ground was equally impressive. Incident Command directed all available ground resources to the initial priority areas of Pezula, Upper Old Place, Wit Lokasie, Knysna Heights, Knysna Hospital and Brenton, with 94 Working on Fire firefighters at the fire line through the second night.

Resources were stretched to the limit as more firefighters were deployed to respond to fires in George, Plettenberg Bay as well as other areas of Greater Knysna. At one point the fire line across the Eden District stretched over 100 kilometres. Along with the incredible heat and adrenaline-fueled fatigue, the firefighters were in constant danger of the fires suddenly switching direction, driven by gusts of wind of up to 110km per hour.

With the assistance of welcome rain, most of the fires were contained within the first week, save for mopping-up operations and flare ups. The Knysna Fire was officially declared over by the 12th day, leaving in its wake seven people burned to death, close to 1 200 homes destroyed and about 20 000 hectares of vegetation burnt, much of it natural forest, fynbos and alien invasive plant species.

Were it not for the gallantry of almost 1 000 firefighters, the human and environmental costs would have been much, much worse.



# WHAT WORKING ON FIRE BROUGHT TO THE FIREFIGHTING EFFORT



**IT TOOK A THOUSAND FIREFIGHTERS** to defeat the Knysna blaze. The Department of Environmental Affairs Working on Fire programme contingent provided the bulk of the firefighting resources and at its peak, was made up of 485 firefighters in 22 teams. The firefighters who assembled in Knysna to provide much-needed firefighting assistance to local fire authorities were men and women from various parts of the Western Cape, Free State, North West, Eastern Cape and Gauteng.

What made this deployment of Working on Fire resources more significant was that an additional 300 firefighters were also deployed to assist local authorities and landowners with fires in the Tsitsikamma region of the Eastern Cape.

The firefighting resources provided by Working on Fire made up 63 percent of the total firefighting resources deployed in the Knysna fires. Eleven fire trucks, six crew buses and 12 light delivery vehicles were dispatched by Working on Fire to assist in the firefighting efforts and also to help evacuate more than 8 000 residents to safe areas.



In addition to these rescue and firefighting teams, Working on Fire also dispatched 17 pilots, four spotter planes, four helicopters and two Air Tractor AT-802 water bombers that provided critical aerial firefighting resources. Working on Fire aerial resources flew 238 flying hours and did an astounding 1 900 water drops (an estimated 2,4 million litres of water). The South African Airforce also provided 12 pilots and Oryx helicopters who flew 86 hours and made 878 water drops in support of Working on Fire aerial operations.

The 485 thoroughly trained and supremely fit WOF firefighters worked 12-hour shifts (rotating day and night shifts) suppressing the fires and playing a crucial role in the monitoring and mop-up operations.

Amid the tragedies and destruction, the stand-out result of the Knysna fires was the confirmation of the strategic value to the country of having a large reserve of firefighters on standby, properly equipped, experienced and trained in integrated fire management services.









## Injured Knysna Fire hero becomes a father



**GAECIOUS MALAKE**, the Bloemfontein Working on Fire firefighter who was injured in the line of duty in Knysna, became a father on 6 July 2017. The beautiful baby boy named Hlonolofatso, meaning 'Blessing', made his first appearance at 3pm. Said Malake, "I cannot describe the emotions I'm feeling at the moment. But I would like to thank my team members from the Bloemfontein Base for making it possible for me to be able to welcome my child into the world by not hesitating to risk their own safety to free me from that tree log."

## Injured firefighter enjoys VIP treatment on first flight



**ON SUNDAY**, 18 June 2017, SA Express flew Gaecious Malake from George to Bloemfontein via OR Tambo International. Malake, a firefighter from the Bloemfontein Base, was injured in the Knysna fires and treated before being able to return home. He enjoyed his first flight, on which he received VIP treatment from Fly SA Express staff. Thank you SA Express for being a model corporate citizen.

## Knysna Fire heroes rescue one of their own



**MONDE NTOBELA**, a Type 1 Crew Leader, and First Aider Thabang Moeletsi are the heroes of the Bloemfontein Base after they rescued colleague Gaecious Malake.

Malake was working on the fire line when he was felled by a falling tree which trapped his body. Ntobela and Moeletsi's quick response saved Malake from a potentially fatal result. Malake was the only serious injury among the 113-strong Bloemfontein contingent that saw service in Knysna, which his rescuers feel testifies to their meticulous application of safety protocols.

"It feels great to be recognised for the work that we do, but I must say that it was a team effort and that the whole team came together quickly to help our injured team member and get him to safety," says Moeletsi.

Ntobela adds, "On the fire line that evening we observed all safety protocols and wore all the personal protective clothing. But because we work under dangerous conditions things happen that are out of our control and that is what happened to Gaecious. Safety comes first for us. All the necessary protective equipment were utilised and because he wore protective clothing, the injuries he sustained were fortunately minor in comparison to what could have occurred without it."

## Working of Fire MD commends firefighters

**WORKING ON FIRE** Managing Director Trevor Abrahams has commended Monde Ntobela and Thabang Moeletsi for their bravery. As safety is a number one priority at Working on Fire, each team going on and off the fire line has a professionally trained First Aider as per the company's Best Operating Practices. This ensures that any firefighter injured on and off the fire line will receive emergency care to avoid further injury.

"Thank you to the Bloemfontein team and management for following protocols and ensuring Gaecious received the best treatment. This is a clear example of one of our key value in Working on Fire, Teamwork," said Mr Abrahams.

# HEROES OF THE SKY

*During that fateful week in June, 17 men took to the sky and literally changed the course of the fire. During those days many residents and firefighters would look up at the sound of howling engines and clattering rotors and give thanks for their angels in the sky. Yet most of them will never meet the men who saved their lives and homes or even know their names. We asked three Working on Fire pilots what makes a person take to the sky to test the limits of the aircraft and their skills against nature's elements at their most ferocious.*

## Barries Barnard: Huey pilot



**HUGO (BARRIES) BARNARD** joined the fight against wild-land fires while working in the forestry industry in Mpumalanga. He was part of a ground team during forest fire operations at first before completing his Private Pilot Licence and Commercial Pilot Licence, for both fixed wing and rotor

blade aircraft. He flew fixed wings for a while, but has been a helicopter pilot since 1996.

Barries was on call at the Working on Fire base in Ugie, Eastern Cape, when he was called to assist with the Knysna fires.

"I left Ugie at three o'clock in the morning and got to Knysna at around eleven," recalls Barries. Later on after having rested, Barries and his Huey chopper took to the skies to help fight the flames, which had already destroyed many private properties.

"I have been involved in aerial firefighting in South Africa for many years," he says, "but the devastation caused by the Knysna fires was the worst I have ever seen."

Barries says he was touched by the hospitality of the local community. "People who had just lost their homes offered assistance to other victims and even supported us with meals."



### WHY DOES HE KEEP DOING IT?

*Barries says the satisfaction he gets from helping to extinguish a fire and saving properties and lives is indescribable.*

*"I really enjoy my job. I enjoy being part of a team - both ground and aerial firefighters - that works together to achieve a common goal."*



## Rinus van Raaij: Bomber pilot



**RINUS VAN RAAIJ's** father was involved in aviation, which ignited his passion for planes from a young age. Apart from attaining his licence to fly, Rinus is also a licenced Aircraft Maintenance Engineer (AME) and has worked for Kishugu's Aircraft Maintenance Organisation, FFA Aviation AMO 1116.

Rinus flies an Air Tractor AT-802 – a water bomber plane – for WOF Aviation.

The AT-802 is an amazing airplane. Equipped with amphibious floats, the plane can be landed on water to scoop water into its float tanks which it dumps on fires in very precise bombing runs. Flying it in the conditions experienced in Knysna required not only great skill and courage but complete trust in the machine and a very cool temperament.

Rinus was based in Nelspruit in Mpumalanga for the winter fire season, when authorities asked Working on Fire to send resources to help fight the Knysna fires. "I don't think I had ever seen such big flames," says Rinus. "The visibility was very low due to the large amount of smoke, and there were also really strong winds at times."

The aerial resources were used to douse the flames and attempt to cool the surface to help the ground teams operate effectively. Where the flames were particularly intense, they used water drops strategically to turn the direction of the fire away from people and houses.

"I was shocked by the amount of personal and financial loss the area suffered, but was in awe of the camaraderie that still existed among the people of Knysna," says Rinus. "They were so eager to get involved and help us where they could."

### WHAT MOTIVATES HIM?

*"Although the conditions can make flying challenging, we are fighting to save properties, life and limb and that keeps us motivated. Flying to fight wildfires is tremendously rewarding. It is a privilege to have a job that is stimulating, but that also helps people."*

## Frank Smook: Spotter pilot



**FRANK SMOOK** is the Working on Fire Aerial Operations Manager for the Northern Regions based in Nelspruit. Frank started his flying career as a commercial charter pilot and changed over to aerial firefighting in 2013.

He spent a whole week flying a control and command aircraft – also referred to as a spotter plane – during the Knysna fires. Most mornings, the spotters did reconnaissance (recce) flights to identify the hotspots. They communicated this information to the Joint Operations Centre, which dispatched ground teams and aerial support to the areas.

"The fire was very widespread, as opposed to a concentrated fire, and we had to split resources to cover all the hotspots," Frank says, noting that it had not been an easy operation.

"Even though we follow procedures and conduct ourselves professionally, aerial firefighting still holds many risks. As the spotter pilot, the safety of the other pilots is your main concern. It is your duty to coordinate aerial resources and serve as communication between ground and air. The visibility during this operation was extremely poor due to extensive smoke and without proper communication, the operational area can be a dangerous place."

### WHAT ATTRACTED HIM TO THIS VERY SPECIAL JOB?

*"I was attracted by the stimulating and fulfilling nature of this job," says Frank. "No two fires are the same and they rarely occur in the same place. And you get to help people, while 'just doing your job'."*

*"The number of people who expressed their gratitude to Working on Fire though, made it all worth it," Frank adds with a smile.*

# WOF FIREFIGHTERS SPEAK ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES IN KNYSNA



**CASTELLO TEAM TYPE 1 CREW LEADER**, Joseph Mokgeledi, was one of the North West firefighters deployed to the Knysna fires.

He said when the call for assistance in Knysna came, all he could think about was saving lives and protecting the environment. “It’s what I have been professionally trained to do, but what I saw there was nothing I have ever seen in the North West,” says Mokgeledi. Mokgeledi, who joined WOF in 2011 says, “I have always wanted to be a hero, to motivate and inspire people for the better and most importantly contribute to the community. And I feel I did part of it while in Knysna.

“I wish all the Knysna residents well as they rebuild their homes and urge them to always be fire safe.”



**VUYANI KLAAS SAYS**, “The Knysna fire was the first time I attended a fire as a crew leader. I’m still on probation but attending to a fire as a crew leader is different to just attending as a firefighter because you need to lead the team to ensure you fight the fire with the best strategy possible and ensure at the same time that you team is safe.

“I learned a lot while we were in Knysna and I will apply it when called out to a fire again.”



**TYPE 2 CREW LEADER WISEMAN THULANI MBELE** led the Kleinmond Team.

“The Knysna Fire was one of the most intense experiences for me and my team. Fighting the fire was tough but we managed to get through it. My team was very motivated and worked until we saw good results and ensured that the areas we were working in were suppressed and safe. As a crew leader I took charge of my team and ensured that everyone remained safe and worked together,” he says.

“This was one of the biggest fires I have ever seen. As for the base camp it was very well organised. We had sufficient sleeping space and my team and all firefighters were well fed and looked after by the Base Camp Manager, Regional Managers and Base Managers.”



**WOF FREE STATE FIREFIGHTER** Molefi Sebonang says, “I have been a Working on Fire firefighter for three years and have been to the Western Cape twice so far to assist in firefighting efforts. The Knysna Fire was really something different that I hadn’t experienced before. Being on the fire line throughout the night was tough but with the help of my crew leaders and my team, we managed to get the fire under control.”





## KNYSNA: THE MANAGERS' ASSESSMENT

*Working on Fire's management often reports on fires and narrates the firefighters' experiences from their desks but, due to the severity of the Knysna Fires, all hands had to be on deck. Some management personnel landed in Knysna on 7 June, the day the fires started.*



**WORKING ON FIRE HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS,** Linton Rensburg says, “Our Knysna experience was one of those difficult periods in our lives, both professionally and on a personal level. We met so many people that week who, just through their smiles and handshakes, made us feel proud again to be in service of this beautiful country.

“It was something special to see firefighters from local, district and provincial authorities and our young firefighting warriors from the Working on Fire programme going into action day and night, asking for nothing much other than a smile and a handshake. It was our privilege as the Working on Fire Communications Team to get their stories told amidst this tragic disaster. Heartwarming stories of these young men and

women who stood tall and fought fires at the forefront with fire services from across the province.

“We also owe our firefighting pilots a huge debt of gratitude for confronting difficult conditions and bravely doing what they do best. Shane Christian, General Manager of Working on Fire in the Western Cape, showed commitment and dedication soldiering on despite having been bedridden with flu.

“I thank the Communication Team for their tolerance, dedication and perseverance. We all knew once we got to Knysna that it was not going to be easy but that our presence there was with one objective – to honour and recognise our firefighters by telling their story,” Rensburg says.





**WESTERN CAPE PROVINCIAL COMMUNICATION OFFICER**, Lauren Howard says, “The Knysna Fire was one of the most eye-opening experiences for me.

“On 7 June I received calls from my then General Manager, Shane Christian, and my National Communications Manager, Linton Rensburg, to pack my bags and travel to Knysna. That evening was like a scene from a movie when I arrived in Knysna. From Sedgefield straight through to Knysna the N2 was lined with fire. Coming into Knysna at 22:30pm, the town was dark.

“As we approached the Joint Operation Centre (JOC) at the Knysna Municipality, we saw nothing but a beam of light coming towards us. It was a house that had just exploded. In the two years that I have been with Working on Fire, I have never seen such devastation.

“As the Western Cape Communications Officer, my role was to produce content and to supply information about the fire on our social media platforms as well as mainstream media. We started at the JOC profiling the behind-the-scenes moments and then we moved on to the Base Camp. On the morning of 8 June at about 4.20am, I rushed to Pezula Estate with our Ground Operations Manager, Ray-aan Majiet, who was with a team of Working on Fire firefighters who had been dispatched there as properties were under threat. Keeping a safe distance from the raging fire and the firefighters, I started filming. The clip was ready and went live just after 5am.

“This clip on social media became one of our most viewed clips ever with close to 38 000 views and was shared more than 500 times and used by Reuters and international news agencies.

“Between 7 and 18 June, I got to experience the true passion of the Working on Fire firefighters and the impact that almost 500 brave young men and women made in the Knysna community. There was never a sad face and our firefighters were ready to go at any hour.

“Aside from the lack of sleep some evenings it was an amazing experience personally and professionally.”



**WESTERN CAPE GENERAL MANAGER**, Shane Christian says, “There were a lot of obstacles that challenged us during the first few days at the camp site. But as a team we managed to ensure that, with the help of many organisations and agencies, our firefighters were well fed, rested and briefed before and after working shifts on the fire line.



“There was never a sad or frustrated face at the camp, and in my many years of working in Working on Fire, I can truly say that the firefighters never had such high morale and worked diligently in their efforts to suppress the fires.

“From my side I'd like to thank my management for all the hard work and sleepless nights they put in and to our firefighters, thank you for doing what you do best – protecting the environment. It was a tough 12 days, but we managed to push through with such high morale until desired results were achieved.”

(Shane has since been promoted to National General Manager for the Working on Fire programme)



**WORKING ON FIRE WESTERN CAPE** Assistant General Manager, Felicia Ngwasheng says, “I have close to ten years’ working experience in the fire-fighting industry. But nothing could have prepared me for the catastrophic Knysna fires. Not even the footage or pictures I had received before I got to Knysna reflected the devastating realities of what the people of Knysna faced.

“I am immensely proud of all the WOF firefighters who worked tirelessly and stood up to save lives and protect our environment. Their exploits will forever be in recorded in our history.

“These fires brought together people from all over the provinces and different stakeholders joined forces to make sure the fires were put out. When teams arrived from the fires they really looked tired. The base camp managers made sure they got food and rest. ‘Lesson learned?’ It takes courage and dedication to work in this field. It’s a job only the brave can do. ‘Job well done’ to the teams.”



**GAUTENG REGIONAL MANAGER** Larry Mathaba, who led 40 firefighters from the Dr JS Moroka and Roodeplaat teams to Knysna, says that the Knysna inferno was the mother of all fires he has fought.

Upon arrival in Knysna, they were greeted by a huge, dark cloud of smoke and windy weather conditions. His first thought was ‘this is a national disaster’.

On the fire line, there were times when fire rapidly turned towards the firefighters, who took cover in the park. When he saw one of the houses engulfed he says, “I felt pain filled with sorrow. I have attended huge fires before but the Knysna fires were difficult to battle. They were dangerous,” says Mathaba, remembering the flames that were sometimes as high as a three-storey building.

He found himself constantly thinking of the people who could have been trapped in these fires. Mathaba says that although it was quite scary on the fire line during the fire suppression, he felt he needed to be strong to save more lives and properties in the community.

“We are professionally trained as veld and forest firefighters. Our competence and dedication made the fire suppression possible in the end.”



*While the ‘Knysna 12 Days of Service’ publication is an account of this largest-ever deployment of firefighting personnel in South Africa, as viewed through the eyes of the Working on Fire management and firefighters who participated in the battle, we salute all the men and women who came to the assistance of towns on the Garden Route, not least the valiant fire services personnel from not only Knysna and the Eden District Municipality but from various other towns throughout the Western Cape, as well as the volunteers and contractors from SANParks.*





# CABINET CONGRATULATES FIREFIGHTING EFFORTS

*The South African government, through a Cabinet statement released on the Knysna fires on 21 June 2017, congratulated everyone who were involved in the Knysna fire operations.*



**CABINET COMMENDED** the prompt integrated approach and response from government, business and ordinary South Africans in assisting the firefighting efforts in Knysna. Cabinet pays tribute to the heroic volunteer firefighter, Bradley Richards, and the truck driver, John Blaauw, who assisted firefighters in transporting water, who paid with their lives saving their community.

Cabinet further extends a special appreciation to the Working on Fire teams that bravely fought the raging fires. They are our pride! Cabinet wishes a speedy recovery to the two injured firefighters, including Ian Barnard who sustained injuries while trying to save Bradley Richards.

President Zuma visited the communities of Wit Lokasie and Knysna Heights that were

adversely affected by the fires and attended the memorial service of Mr Richards. In the true firefighter team spirit, Mr Barnard was able to attend the memorial service of his colleague, Mr Richards. The President dispatched humanitarian and other support to all the affected areas.

This was coordinated through the National Joint Operations Centre Disaster Management structure, working with the Western Cape Provincial Government and Provincial Disaster Management teams.

Cabinet thanks all non-governmental organisations, the private sector, volunteers and communities who are supporting affected communities.





Former President Jacob Zuma addressing firefighters with Minister of Environmental Affairs Edna Molewa and WOF MD Trevor Abrahams.



The Minister of Environmental Affairs and WOF MD Trevor Abrahams arrive at the memorial service for volunteer firefighter Bradley Richards.



Guard of Honour at the memorial service for Bradley Richards.



Former President Zuma greeting injured firefighter from Plettenberg Bay.

## KNYSNA MAYOR THANKS WORKING ON FIRE

**THE KNYSNA FIRE** in June 2017 was the biggest fire disaster in living memory and one of the most devastating.

If it wasn't for our local, district and provincial fire authorities working hand in hand with firefighters from Working on Fire and the Volunteer Wildfire Services, the extent of this disaster would have been unimaginable.

On behalf of the Knysna Municipality and our residents I want to specifically pay tribute to the 500 firefighters and pilots from Working on Fire who came from various parts of South Africa, including the Western Cape, to assist us in our hour of need.



The community of Knysna has seen and appreciates what you have done. Even the most vulnerable community members opened their hearts and pockets to contribute and donate to the firefighters as a way of showing appreciation.

Know that in the eyes of Knysna you are our heroes and we salute you. Thank you very much.

# WORKING ON FIRE MANAGING DIRECTOR THANKS DONORS

*Working on Fire Managing Director, Trevor Abrahams, expressed his gratitude and thanks to all who donated to assist Working on Fire and all the fire services during the Knysna fires. He said Working on Fire had experienced a tremendous outpouring of support from the public and businesses in terms of supplies as well as cash donations.*

**THE AIRLINES** SA Express, FlySafair, Federal Airlines, Kulula and Mango assisted to fly in Working on Fire personnel from various provinces to assist in Knysna. Pick n Pay, Game Stores, Boerie Squad, Gift of the Givers and KFC donated food and refreshments to the teams operating in Knysna. Several other businesses – such as Silverton Radiators and Cell C – and the many individuals, both known and anonymous, were also acknowledged for their support and donations, not only to Working on Fire but to the residents affected by the fires.

“We thank you all for the support,” said Abrahams. “This has really been a situation where the corporate sector and citizenry came to the party and assisted our efforts in managing this fire.”





## KFC SA kept Working on Fire firefighters fuelled with free meals



**KFC SOUTH AFRICA** showed model corporate citizenship when it decided to sponsor meals for the brave young men and women who were battling intense fires around Knysna, George and Plettenberg Bay. The company provided free KFC meals to firefighters whenever needed.

“Like so many South Africans, all of us at KFC were hugely concerned with what happened in Knysna with all the fires in the area and wanted to help and salute all the Working on Fire firefighters. So we provided them with meals for the duration of the fire,” says Doug Smart, the Managing Director of KFC SA.

## Operation SA and Al-Imdaad Foundation donate R25 000

**DURING THE KNYSNA FIRES**, humanitarian relief organisations Operation SA and the Al-Imdaad Foundation launched an urgent appeal for funds to assist victims of the devastating storms and fires in the Western Cape. The organisations donated R25 000 of the funds received to Working on Fire to assist with the firefighting efforts.

Qari Ziyaad Patel from the Al-Imdaad Foundation said, “We couldn’t sit back and watch the devastation. We needed to help those in need with urgency and we appealed to South Africans to support.”

The Al-Imdaad Foundation’s focus areas are disaster preparedness, emergency relief, widows, orphans and child welfare, water and sanitation,



housing and shelter, health, food and nutrition, education and skills, social welfare and Islamic programmes.

# RESIDENTS HONOUR FIRE HEROES AT UNITY MARCH



**ON SATURDAY**, 17 June 2017, the residents of Greater Knysna formed a guard of honour to thank our brave firefighters at the Unity March. The Unity March saw more than 400 Working on Fire firefighters and management march down Knysna Main Road to say their final goodbye to the Knysna residents, who had become like family during the 12-day battle.

This Unity March was organised by the Mayor of Knysna to show the town's appreciation of Working on Fire and other fire services for their brave efforts during the Knysna fires.

Type 2 Crew Leader Wiseman Thulani Mbele, from the Kleinmond Team, addressed the residents during the Unity March and thanked everyone for their kindness, support and motivation to firefighters during this trying time.

Mbele says, "It was 12 long days but we did it. The Unity March was very touching. I have never seen a community come together in such a way to thank us for suppressing fires.

"It was a very emotional moment for me. I would once again like to thank the Knysna community for celebrating us the way they did. I could see their love and appreciation."







GOD BLESS OUR HEROES



# GARDEN ROUTE REBUILD MAKING HEADWAY

*Following the devastating fires of June 2017 which caused major damage to properties and public infrastructure as well as loss of lives, Working on Fire teams under the guidance of the Southern Cape Fire Protection Association started work on the Garden Route Rebuild Initiative (GRR).*



**THE GRR WAS LAUNCHED** by the Western Cape Government to coordinate all the public and private efforts to rebuild the Garden Route. Various areas of work are being coordinated through the GRR initiative.

Some of the key challenges are stabilising the burned slopes to minimise the risk of mudslides, dealing with the regrowth of alien vegetation and the continuing fire risk of people living next to wildlands.

Working on Fire deployed 45 firefighters and managers to work on a fire buffer zone in the

Knysna area. Other teams started stabilising high-risk slopes and working on fire risk mitigation interventions between Riversdale and Nature's Valley.

These teams have been bolstered by the support of contractors from SANParks and Working for Water participants.

The GRR is working closely with relevant provincial and national stakeholders, such as the national Department of Environmental Affairs and the Southern Cape Fire Protection Association.





# THANK YOU WORKING ON FIRE



**JO PETERS**

*"Goodbye superheroes! Come back and stay in our beautiful town when you have rest time. Stay safe and be blessed always."*



**REGINALD PETERSEN**

*"Well done to the volunteer services that helped fight the fires, travelling with their own private transport and own money."*



**LYNETTE DA LUZ**

*"Well done. Thank you!!! God bless you all! You are the true heroes."*



**PHAKAMA PK HESHU**

*"May the Lord protect them in those raging fires. Fight raging fire aggressively and apply all the safety rules at the fire line #heroes."*



**MARCELLE LA MARQUE GOULD**

*"Thank you each one of you for putting your lives on the line to save our town and bringing us together as a nation. I salute you."*



**HEATHER STUART**

*"Huge respect to these heroes. Without them, I wouldn't be in my home right now. So grateful to them all. There are no words to express how thankful we are."*



**VERONICA DE VOOGT**

*"With huge respect and gratitude for your immense contribution to stop this horrific inferno! Chapeau!"*



**SARAH EDER**

*"I cannot imagine how much worse it would have been without these brave heroes."*



**LESLEY JOAN ROBERTS**

*"Thank you for literally saving our village Sedgfield!!!!"*



**MARK MCKENNA**

*"Incredible bravery and professionalism!! Thanks to all."*



**MEGAN MCCARTHY**

*"Wow wow wow!!! Guy Preston, EPWP, DAFF, SANParks & all the other implementers - you are my heroes. Bless you all! Madiba would have been so proud."*



**CHERYL PAULL**

*"Lump in my throat! Our South African Super Heroes! Thank you. Makes me proud to be South African."*



Working on Fire is an  
Expanded Public Works Programme  
which resides within the  
Department of Environmental Affairs.



Environmental Affairs  
Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries  
Co-operative Governance  
Water and Sanitation



**EXPANDED PUBLIC WORKS PROGRAMME**  
Creating opportunities towards human fulfilment

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