



## National Rural Fire Authority

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NATIONAL RURAL FIRE AUTHORITY CIRCULAR 2009/13

### **2008/2009 Fire Season - Lessons Learnt in the Management of Wildfires**

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The 2008-2009 fire season last summer was a busy one for some regions of New Zealand, in total there were 4,345 wildfires resulting in 2,363 hectares burnt.

Whilst these statistics are not high compared with previous fire seasons, the 2008-2009 season presented challenges to some Rural Fire Authorities (RFAs) in dealing with the complexities of managing wildfires in our forest and rural lands.

Through this National Rural Fire Authority (NRFA) circular, the NRFA seeks to outline and draw to the attention of all RFAs some common themes arising from the incident management of these wildfires and where lessons can be learnt in readiness for the forthcoming 2009-2010 fire season.

#### **2. INCIDENT MANAGEMENT OF WILDFIRES IN 2008/09 - LESSONS LEARNT**

From analysis of wildfire incidents during the 2008-2009 fire season, findings are that some common themes arise where RFAs need to work on improving their management of wildfires. Specifically these findings relate to:

- a) Lack of sufficient information to an incoming Incident Management Team (IMT) e.g. resourcing status, fire weather & behaviour, incident objectives, lead agency with jurisdiction.
- b) Incomplete briefings and handover processes when Incident Controllers (IC) formally meet, review, discuss, prepare and sign off on delegations of authority (written) and formal handovers.
- c) Confusion as to the function and roles of Emergency Operations Centres (EOC), versus Incident Control Points (ICP), and Staging Areas (SA).
- d) Gaps in the training and development of personnel new to Incident Management Team roles.
- e) A lack of planning by RFAs in pre-determining suitable locations with facilities, for Incident Control Points (ICP), to manage large and prolonged fire events.
- f) Some Regional Rural Fire Committees have no formal regional incident management teams (RIMTs). Some have no formal RIMT operating plans.

- g) Lack of human resourcing at incidents for IMT support functions, most commonly in the logistics and planning units.
- h) Under utilisation by RFAs of the NZFS Incident Command units for use in providing communications and IT resourcing to rural fire incidents.
- i) Written Incident Action Plans (IAP) lacking sufficient or complete information for effective incident management. e.g. sector maps, safety briefings, weather forecasts.
- j) Incomplete or insufficient resource tracking and financial records management at wildfire incidents.
- k) Lack of identification of some IMT personnel at incidents i.e. not wearing jerkins or wearing incorrect jerkins for IMT position held.

### **3. FIRE FIGHTING COSTS**

Over the past ten years the costs involved in fire suppression activities for wildfires in New Zealand is slowly trending upwards. The majority of these costs are claimed by Rural Fire Authorities lodging claims on the National Rural Fire Fighting Fund (the Fund).

The National Rural Fire Authority is accountable to the Minister of Internal Affairs, and secondly the Minister of Conservation, for the administration of the Fund and ensuring that cost claimed are fair and reasonable.

In undertaking this role the NRFA is required to provide guidance in ensuring cost effective solutions are activated for extended wildfires events and that local resources are not over stretched. There are concerns that better outcomes could have been achieved in some situations in the past and that there are lessons to be learnt in going forward into the future

### **4. PARTNERSHIPS AND APPLYING LESSONS LEARNT**

There has been significant learning from overseas experience with approx four hundred (400) New Zealand forest and rural fire personnel having participated in ten (10) international deployments since the year 2000. Lessons learnt during this time have been and need to continue to be applied and taken forward.

In the past five years the NRFA has worked with the forest and rural fire sector to increase New Zealand's capability to support extended wildfire incidents and to ensure that local resources are supported, and that the fatigue levels of local resources are not at risk.

To this end we have three (3) multi agency National Incident Management Teams (NIMT) and a Seasonal Fire Fighter group of twenty five (25) Crew Leaders (SFFCL) which are now capable of supporting Rural Fire Authorities in producing better outcomes at extended wildfire events.

This partnership between the NRFA and the forest and rural fire management sector are initiatives which if not utilised and it is seen that they should, then questions will need to be asked should it be seen that lessons have not be learnt.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are conclusions and recommendations from this analysis of the 2008-2009 fire season wildfires, where lessons can be learnt by RFAs.

- a) RFAs need to work together with their Regional Rural Fire Committees to establish and develop a Regional Incident Management Teams (RIMTs) with formal RIMT activation protocols and operating plans.
- b) RFAs to raise their levels of readiness for managing multiple or complex wildfire incidents through:
  - i. gaps analysis and providing ongoing training and development for personnel in Incident Management Team management and support roles;
  - ii. pre-determining suitable locations with facilities for Incident Control Points (ICP), for effective management of large and prolonged fire events;
  - iii. review readiness and response sections of fire plans and make provision for: activating RIMTs, National IMTs, NRFA Seasonal Fire Fighter Crews, specialists for IMTs, provision of Coms & IT resourcing and command units.
  - iv. RFA's need to be familiar with the NRFA National IMT and NRFA Seasonal Fire Fighter (SFF) Operating Plans. (Ref: RuralNet Secure Web site)
- c) RFAs review their incident management processes for wildfires to ensure these are in line with guidelines as provided in the Rural Fire Management Handbook (green book) e.g. resourcing of IMTs, preparation of IAPs, resource and financial systems management, aircraft management, IMT positions, roles and functions, and briefings.

## 6. SUMMARY

- a) All RFA's need to note the lessons learnt and the recommendations as outlined in this circular in preparation for the 2009/10 fire season.
- b) Through the National Incident Management Teams (NIMT) and Seasonal Fire Fighter (SFF) programs the NRFA will continue to provide support and resourcing to RFA's in managing large or complex wildfires. Following a formal request to the National Rural Fire Officer, a NIMT and/or SFF Crews can be deployed and working at an incident within 12 hours or less.
- c) The three NRFA NIMTs are available to support regions by working together in annual IMT pre fire season training and simulated exercises with the RRFC RFA's. I encourage RFA's to make a request to their local NRFA Manager Rural Fire for this support.
- d) The NRFA has a statutory role of managing the National Rural Fire Fighting Fund (the Fund) to provide grant assistance to RFAs claiming the fair and reasonable costs of suppressing wildfires.
- e) In assessing Fund claims the NRFA has a duty to fully scrutinise the expenditure incurred. Costs for aircraft and personnel at wildfires account for

a large proportion of total costs claimed. For example in 2008/09 of the \$2.78m expended from the Fund, approx \$900k (30%) was paid out for aircraft use. In determining whether such costs are fair and reasonable the NRFA pays particular attention to how effective RFAs are at managing wildfires. Where there are deficiencies an RFA may well find that the NRFA has to make significant deductions from Fund claims.

The 2009-2010 fire season will no doubt provide challenges for RFAs in protecting our forest and rural lands from the incidents and consequences of wildfires. Readiness for such events is key and lessons that can be learnt now will provide for improved outcomes.

Murray Dudfield  
**National Rural Fire Officer**