

A Hot Topic...

Greetings Neighbours.

As mentioned in a previous Chairman's Letter, Controlled Burning within our Estate looms on the horizon. With no history of this here, the idea will raise eyebrows and start debates! The aim of this text is to fuel these debates with as much accurate information as possible. The following is some background thinking, where we are to date and the start of a plan to move forward.

Background:

I feel like I have stepped back in time... Plett South Fire Management Unit (PSFMU) have been working in the outlying area west of Plett for many years - prior to the 2017 fires and since. Folk there experienced and learned the risk of living in a Fynbos biome. Fynbos is by nature highly flammable, adapted to and dependent on fire for its survival. To have Fynbos grow within a 3 – 5m radius of any structure is extremely reckless. Just one episode of fighting a Fynbos Wildfire will give anyone an understanding of how highly flammable it is!

Some may recall an Eco Estate in St Francis which had thatch rooves as a requirement for years. In two years they had 3 wildfires on adjoining properties and half the houses burnt down. That rule changed! Our Estate does not have such rules but certainly, for our safety, adherence to the Law and common practice needs to be addressed by both homeowners and by the HOA.

Brackenridge's last three annual Fire Reports have warned of a problem which only grows larger with changes in land use on adjoining properties and with the increase in the Estate's population. Our Fire Management Plan, with the many variations of Common vs Private land, vegetation, varied slopes and other factors, could take years get to grips with.

Young healthy Fynbos is already prone to fire. We can add in some of the oldest, most densely packed, overgrown and (refer Enviro Report) unhealthy Fynbos in the area. More than 25 years of ground fuel accumulation, dry "woody" Fynbos, abundant Bietou Bush, all add to the fire danger in our Estate. We all need to realize this danger on our door. Things must change.

Following any burn, the maintenance of regrowth is vital. When assisting on farms where this has been done after / since the 2017 fires, I can only appreciate the incredible growth and health of chest high fynbos, bursting with flowers, "beasties", birds etc... a truly beautiful sight! Several Brackenridge residents have noted an increased number of tortoises and others in our gardens - is the bush outside too thick for them to freely move around in? Debate!!

For those who live in "outlying" areas of Plett, controlled burning is now almost routine. In the last 10 years, Bitou has had one (that I know of) controlled burn go wrong - 100% due to landowner's neglect. We have also had many wildfires start and progress to where hours, days or weeks of active firefighting was needed to bring them under control. Who can forget the fires of 2017 which started with a lightning strike several days prior to the "Berg wind" of 7 June, which brought on the chaos, loss of life and destruction of that period.

For many folk living in "suburbia", thoughts of fire vary from a campfire, to an inconvenience causing smoke, ash, possible throat or lung irritation, to general anxiety and sometimes serious fears. To the folk in the Environmental game, fire has a very real purpose and benefit.

To those in the Firefighting game, fires are both a friend and an enemy – depending on how it comes calling. Controlled fires do reduce Wildfire intensity / prevent Wildfires which have huge damage potential.

The majority of our residents will know little, if anything, about the National Veld and Forest Fire Act (NVFFAct) and how it relates to every landowner. We are now at a point where the Wildfire threat from within the Estate is seen as greater than the threat from our adjoining neighbours.

Having completed Brackenridge's National Veld & Forest Act (NVFFA) compliance report a day or two before the Draft Enviro report was first received, it was good to see the latter speak to the same solution to their problem as we had outlined for fire danger. We have two problems: mounting fire danger AND Bio-diversity degradation. One solution: Controlled Block burns.

From an Enviro perspective, Brackenridge appears to be in violation of the very "outlines" which defined how Brackenridge was allowed to be developed in the first place. Add in every Landowner's responsibility as listed in the NVFFAct ... we all have work to do!!

If we all work together on this plan: assisting on the Fire Team, help move slow animals out of burn areas on the day of a burn, set up firebreaks on individual & common property, set up "defensible zones" around our homes, we can address the dangers AND move toward restoring our beautiful Fynbos.

In time, fire WILL come to visit us in Brackenridge. Let there be no doubt about it! We had a direct lightning strike in Orchid Valley just last year. We do have influence on how that fire visits us – as a Wildfire or as a Controlled burn. I suggest we choose the latter, no matter the comparatively minor inconvenience it WILL cause us all.

The National Veld & Forest Fire Act of 1998 and its various amendments (NVFFAct):

Few properties in SA (if any) are 100% NVFFAct compliant. Legal liability in terms of the Act is measured against what is reasonably expected, rather than attempting to strictly define requirements across the broad spectrum of South African topography, land use & climate.

Brackenridge Estate has the responsibility to act on issues related to the safety, security, and well-being of us all. A good amount of time & money is spent on crime and security but our current Fire Safety measures vary from OK, to inappropriate, to virtually non-existent in the case of firebreaks between Common & Private properties. Should a fire move between properties causing damage, loss of life or structure, the resulting legal action could be huge!!

Extracts from the NVFFAct:

12. Duty to prepare and maintain firebreaks

(1) Every owner on whose land a veldfire may start or burn or from whose land it may spread must prepare and maintain a firebreak on his or her side of the boundary between his or her land and any adjoining land.

13. Requirements for firebreaks

An owner who is obliged to prepare and maintain a firebreak must ensure that, with due regard to the weather, climate, terrain and vegetation of the area-

- (a) it is wide enough and long enough to have a reasonable chance of preventing a veldfire from spreading to or from neighbouring land;
- (b) it does not cause soil erosion; and
- (c) it is reasonably free of inflammable material capable of carrying a veldfire across it.

16. *Exemption from prohibitions on damaging plants*

The right or duty to prepare and maintain a firebreak in terms of this Chapter prevails over any prohibition in any other law on the cutting, disturbance, damage, destruction or removal of any plant or tree, except that the owner must -

- (a) where possible, transplant any plant which is protected in terms of any law; or
- (b) where it is safe and feasible, position the firebreak so as to avoid such plant or tree.

Section 13. (c) above should be noted. Many “non-flammable” options exist & should be explored, while bearing in mind that a firebreak must be ON THE BOUNDARY and is also seen as an access route for Firefighting – it is to be clear enough for this purpose!

All of us in here Brackenridge, individual property owners as well as the custodians of Common property, have a legal obligation to act... but before we fly into a frenzy to get things rectified and in place immediately, it must be noted that the adoption of a Fire Management Plan which outlines effective measures to be put in place, coupled with action taken to achieve these measures, even if not yet fully implemented, is considered in any liability case.

Brackenridge is a SCFPA member and has the NVFFAct compliance report which forms the basis of a Fire Management Plan, already in place. The work on implementing this on Common property has already begun.

Attached Map:

This map is part of our NVFFAct Compliance report. Shown are Block burn areas (numbered) and firebreaks where common & private properties meet, as well as breaks on the estate boundaries. These firebreaks vary from 3 meters (2m Common + 1m Private) up to 6 meters (4m + 2m) on boundaries between common & private land. Variations are determined by vegetation, slope, size of adjoining property & other. Widths indicated are considered as MINIMUM required to be fit for purpose.

Common land firebreaks (2 – 4m): Instead of the current random collection of mowed belts in some areas of the estate, we should have thinner mowed belts directly on all boundaries. These would be maintained by the Estate landscape team. These are NOT footpaths. ALL existing footpaths would remain, maintained at 1 to 1.5m width.

Private land firebreaks (1 – 2m): all highly flammable plants like Fynbos, Bietou bush etc. should be replaced with less flammable species like Spekboom, aloe or other.

Defensible Space: This is a minimum 3 meter zone around a home or structure which has had all flammable material removed / replaced with less flammable. No fire wood storage and no Fynbos! Timber decks are a big problem needing special care.

Where are we at so far:

Timeline: Ideal burn season for Fynbos rehabilitation is May to September. No Block burns will be done before then.

No Controlled burns can be undertaken until it is “safe” to go ahead. The largest elements which must be in place are the Control measures - the Firebreaks on the borders between Common & Private properties.

Brackenridge Estate has been a Southern Cape Fire Protection Association (SCFPA) member for some years. They have agreed to assist with our burn preparations and to manage the burn days. They have been successfully doing large Controlled Block burns for a very long time. We wait for their outline of actions & requirements. These will take into consideration the Enviro Report. Burns will be attended by SCFPA, Plett South Fire Management Unit (PSFMU), Craggs Working on Fire (WoF) team and any available Brackenridge Fire team members. As always, Bitou Fire & Rescue Services will give the final go ahead and will be on Standby.

Blocks 5 on the map is seen as the ideal first burn site. It is small and flat, ideal for giving all a good idea of what to expect. The four fire hydrants around this block will be used to control the burn and we will have several vehicles & tankers on site standing by. There will be far more crew & equipment on site than required... this purely to give good practical experience.

On Estate work has begun. Staff are thinning out dead plants & shrubs and stacking in specific “burn areas” where any scorching is least visible. This partial clearing will reduce the heat of a Block burn, making it more suitable for seed germination, as well as giving our Fire team some “On the Line” hot experience.

Moving forward:

We will begin burning off Stacks as and when needed. All required permits & permissions will be put in place. Residents & neighbours will be notified of location and proposed date via the Brackenridge Info WhatsApp group. Due to very strict weather conditions required, final go ahead for a burn will only given on the morning of the burn. Stack Burns will be done by Brackenridge Fire team under PSFMU guidance.

Working toward the Common Property firebreaks, starting with Blocks 5 and 6, then ongoing according to recommendations received from SCFPA, has already begun. Other blocks may be added to be burnt at the same time – we await details.

Work on your private properties should begin. Residents are requested to familiarize themselves with Firebreaks adjoining their property (refer map) and begin planting / transplanting / clearing areas indicated. Work on your “Defensible space” should also begin.

We have made a request to our Brackenridge Enviro team to put together a list of “flammable” type plants to be used in the portions of the Firebreaks on Private property as well as in “defensible spaces” around our homes.

The mowing of existing misplaced firebreaks / grass belts should stop as these are seen as largely pointless. Hopefully (but unlikely) some fynbos will come up. It is hoped that burning the longer grass as part of a block burn may generate sufficient heat to stimulate germination of old seeds lying dormant in the ground.

While the aim is to begin with Blocks 5 & 6, burning of other blocks will follow soon enough. Several blocks may even be burnt in any one day. Nobody would want these burns drawn out over endless years, but to do them too close together will be unsightly, unpleasant and

detrimental to the second objective which we are all looking for improvement on: the health of the Fauna & Flora of the Estate.

Time frame for Block burns will be set by the amount of work which needs to be done to put the “Common + Private” Firebreaks in place - most likely finished over a 3 year period. Stack clearing burns, as said earlier, will be done as needed – as / when allowed by Bitou Fire Dept.

We rely on the SCFPA guys for practical goals set in conjunction with our Enviro report.

Drone will fly...

SCFPA will fly a drone to assess the extent of work to prepare fire breaks and to determine fire crew numbers & equipment needed on burn days. Every effort will be made to only fly on the “common property side” of ALL boundaries... but please allow the operator some slack should he cut a corner over private property.

We will use the Brackenridge INFO WhatsApp group to notify all residents when the drone will be flying. Please contact Mariette at the office if you are not on this group.

Budget for this work:

A large portion of the funds needed to get work done on Common property are already in place. It simply means redirecting existing ongoing works into revised objectives, rather than continuing with “less than ideal” practices. Example: stop mowing in the wrong places and start clearing & mowing in the outlined firebreaks.

Clearing along our boundary fences for security reasons has already come a long way. With slight fine-tuning we will have “fit for purpose” border firebreaks without any awful +12 meter wide cut grass areas in an Eco Estate.

Some additional funds are allocated in the upcoming budget – mainly management & burn plan costs, upgrading existing equipment and additional resources for block burn days.

I trust the above info is useful and stimulates informed conversation and action in reaching what is without doubt our common objective – [a safe and beautiful Brackenridge Eco Estate.](#)

Kind regards
Steve Ritky