

Government Declares Second National Disaster Due to Forest Fires

Adding to the impact already felt by Swaziland's national drought disaster, the nation was racked by forest fires that raged for more than seven consecutive days in late July. Dubbed by the Swaziland Fire Department as "the biggest in Swazi history", the fires impacted three of the country's four regions Hhohho, Manzini and Shiselweni. On 1 August 2007, the Prime Minister declared a second national disaster due to the devastating fires.

Pushed by harsh winds, the fires moved at incredible speeds and could not be controlled by company fire teams or the national fire department. The winds helped fires jump fire breaks, fields and even roads. Government sent in the police and the army with water tankers, and helicopters from neighbouring South Africa were also called in. The fires continued to burn however, for several more days.

Human Impact

While only two people were killed in the fires, the health impact of the fire is expected to be significant. Fires of this magnitude are associated with increased particle matter (PM). As such, an increase in respiratory infection is expected among those living close to the affected areas, especially among the young and old.

Baphalali Swaziland Red Cross reports that 160 homes were burned or destroyed by the fires, 90 in Pigg's Peak and 53 in Mbabane, the nation's capital. Another fire, which originated in South Africa, was fanned by high winds and spread over the border into Swaziland, burning 24 homes. Nearly 1,000 people have been left homeless by the fires and require shelter, food, clothing and other assistance. Many livestock suffered burns and some cattle and goats perished in the fires.

Devastation from the fires adds to the food insecurity and scarce water conditions already present in the country. Massive crop failures throughout the nation and the worst drought conditions experienced in 15 years lead government to declare a national disaster in June 2007.

Economic Impact

Both Mondi Forest and Peak Timber companies lost 80% of their tree plantations. One mill was damaged at Peak Timber Company and infrastructure systems that supply potable water to employees was damaged at Mondi. The company is now facing challenges with providing potable water to the worker community inside the plantations. While the companies are likely to employ additional workers in the immediate future to assist in harvesting trees and clearing the damaged forests, it is believed that after a few months the firm will undertake massive retrenchments. Many of the 1,200 people employed at Mondi will lose their jobs and it is estimated that it will take approximately 10 years for the forestry industry to recover from the effects of the disaster. Sappi Usuthu, Swaziland's leading pulp producer is located 80 kilometres south of Pigg's Peak. However, the Sappi Forests were not spared. Sappi lost trees covering more than 4,000 hectares or 7.5% of the company's planted area. The damage will have significant effects on the sustainability and economic survival of the company.

Several other businesses in and around Pigg's Peak were damaged, including Shop Rite, a major supermarket, and several guesthouses and warehouses. Damages to business have not yet been totalled; however damage to homes and business throughout the country are estimated to be in millions of Emalangeneni. Telephone and power lines in the affected areas were also damaged.

In addition, some schools were burned or damaged and many children lost school books and uniforms.

National Response

Government assisted the Fire Department by providing reinforcements in the form of police and army personnel, as well as water tankers. Nearly 100 tankers transported 60,000 litres of water used each day to fight the fires.

Once the fires were extinguished, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Regional Development and Youth Affairs, who is in charge of disaster management, and other high level government officials spent several days touring the areas impacted by the fires. The Prime Minister pledged government assistance for people whose homes, property and livestock were destroyed. However, as the government is already facing a severe, nationwide drought crisis with more than 400,000 people requiring food aid, disaster funds are limited.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade convened a meeting of the international community to announce the disaster declaration and to launch an appeal for support to help the country respond. Government established a Cabinet Task Team to lead the response to both the drought and fire disasters. The Task Team will be lead by the National Disaster Task Force and the Water Crisis Committee. Parliament recently approved a supplementary budget of E140 million (\$20 million U.S.) to respond to the drought. A portion will now be diverted to the fire emergency response.

Red Cross and other organisations have assisted some of the victims hardest hit by the fires with temporary tent shelter, food rations, and blankets.

Immediately after the fires, teams from UNICEF toured the affected areas to assess the damage and determine the best ways to support response efforts. UNICEF continues to work with the Ministry of Regional Development and Youth Affairs to assist where it can.