

SPEECH DELIVERED BY MINISTER FS MUFAMADI IN THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF PROVINCES ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEBATE ON THE READINESS OF PROVINCES TO DEAL WITH DISASTERS CAUSED BY FIRES AND THE IMPACT THEREOF

Chairperson, Honourable Members

On behalf of the Ministry and the Department of Provincial and Local Government, I would like to take this opportunity to express our debt to you for seeing it fit to organize this debate. This debate offers us the welcome opportunity to reflect on the readiness of provinces to deal with disasters caused by fires and the impact thereof. Not only does this debate deal with a matter that bears on the untold human suffering wrought either by the elements or by human activities which are not benign to the environment, but also, it is about a problem which reaches deep into the economy of our country.

The fires at the end of July and beginning of August in Mpumalanga, Kwazulu-Natal, Free State, Eastern Cape, Limpopo and Gauteng had a devastating impact on the lives and livelihoods of our people. Amongst the many casualties that we as a nation have suffered in the wake of those fires, are the twenty men and women whose passing we deeply regret. We do hereby offer our sincere and heartfelt sympathy and condolences to their loved ones. We further offer our sympathies to those of our people who have lost property, plantation, crops, grazing land, livestock and game; as well as those whose lives and livelihoods have been negatively impacted upon by these fires.

As we speak, the relevant national sector departments, provincial departments, municipalities and private entities, are working very hard to make a precise determination of the extent of the damage caused by this disaster. Early indications of the damage and losses include the following:

- As much as 100 000 hectares of forestry and commercial plantations (and a further 22, 700 hectares in Swaziland), and over 200, 000 hectares of grazing land, have been lost;
- Loss of an as-yet unknown number of stock and commercial game species, and other species;

- Environmental damage, including soil erosion and the fires facilitating the spread of invasive alien plants;
- Four sawmills and as-yet undetermined numbers of houses/ buildings were damaged or destroyed;
- The potential of an as-yet unquantified number of existing and future jobs;
- Loss of foreign exchange and revenue and;
- the psychological displacement and loss of productive time impacts during and after the fires.

Chairperson and Honourable Members, it bears emphasizing that had it not been for the decisive and dedicated toil of the **Disaster Management Centers, the cadres of the Working on Fire Programme, the South African National Defence Force, Local Councils, Fire Protection Associations** and other structures, the losses and the damage could have been more staggering. In Mpumalanga alone, Working on Fire Programme provided 32 fire-fighting aircrafts (including four Air Force helicopters) to fight 40 fires, flying over 700 hours. 370 fire-fighters from Work on Fire, and mopping-up support from 105 Working For Water workers, fought the fires. In addition, capacities from local government, the commercial forestry industry and the agricultural sector were mobilized and deployed.

In a letter written to my colleague, the Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, and copied to me, the Executive Director of Forestry South Africa, Mr Edwards, takes the view that had it not been for the Working on Fire Programme, the damage could have reached catastrophic proportions. Mr Edwards actually makes a counterfactual deduction to the effect that the Working on Fire Programme may have saved the country well over R1 billion.

- We are currently undertaking a detailed damage assessment. Co-ordinated by the National Disaster Management Centre, this process involves all the affected provinces, municipalities and national sector departments. The aim is to:
 - Determine the steps that need to be taken to normalize the situation;
 - Identify priority interventions required across the three spheres of government and the private sector, and lastly we intend to;
 - Quantify the extent of damage incurred by all stakeholders with a view to identify those amongst them that may require and/or deserve provincial or national government assistance.

Once the damage assessment has been completed, then a **post-disaster review** will be undertaken. The intention is to identify best practices which must be taken on

board as we establish new benchmarks for organising our disaster prevention and mitigation readiness into the future.

As we all know, the first step towards fighting disasters is to make the issue itself a national priority. In this regard, we are proud to say that the necessary legal and regulatory structures are already in place. We require steadiness of purpose on the part of all stakeholders. All of us must work together to turn regulations into effective practices. In their development planning, all spheres of government must treat disaster prevention and mitigation as a subject for serious, sustained action. The private sector and the academic community must consciously be part of the national effort of purpose toward maintaining the natural resource base upon which we depend for our continued economic development.

The generality of the South African population must take responsibility for preserving the ability of the biotic community to meet the needs of both present and future generations. All these things will happen if and only if, we redouble our efforts to mobilize for enforcement of our legal, regulatory and institutional mechanisms.

Thank you,

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