

FIRE SITUATION

1 February 2006

CONDITION

The region is rapidly drying out after a period of north-west winds and high temperatures. It is dry on the plains and in the high country. Grass and other fuels are drying out leading to the maximum amount of fuel for a fire, easy ignition and rapid fire development – these are extreme fire conditions requiring extreme vigilance by everyone.

RESTRICTIONS

Fire restrictions are in place throughout the region and DOC has imposed a prohibited fire season (total fire ban) in the Mackenzie basin and Ashburton Lakes areas. If these conditions persist other rural fire authorities will be considering total fire bans.

Check with your local fire authority as to the current situation – or better still, avoid all outdoor fires at this time – there is always a risk at this time of year.

FIRES

There have been a number of mainly small fires throughout the region but fortunately, most were extinguished early.

The exceptions to this were two significant fires in the Bottle Lake Forest/Spencer Park area of Christchurch in early January in forest and marram grass. A large amount of time, manpower and money was required to extinguish these fires.

Most of the smaller fires have been in grass, scrub and shelter belts and caused by car fires, re-ignitions of earlier fires, hay barn fires from over-heating hay bales and escaped stubble burns.

FIRE ISSUES

Nearly all fires can be avoided with due care and vigilance on the part of us all.

RE-IGNITIONS

Continually check previous burns – especially land clearing burns where stumps and roots were involved and fires could have burnt under-ground. In hot windy conditions these fires – thought to be out months ago – have been known to re-ignite or break out suddenly. Watch for signs of smoke in previously burnt areas.

HAY BARN FIRES

These fires can be caused from spontaneous combustion – don't stack damp or moist hay and provide air channels through a stack. Even pockets of dampness can cause problems. Check for any heating of the hay stack – temperatures should be under 50°C – over this and you could have problems and need to aerate the stack or even dismantle it. If temperature is above 70°C the stack should be dismantled but only with fire fighting equipment on hand as a fire may ignite once overheated hay contacts the air.

MOWING

Mow in the early morning or evening when conditions are cooler and possibly damper and there is less risk of sparks.

STUBBLE BURNING

Before burning you must ensure you meet the minimum standards set for a burn – check with your fire authority if in doubt. Adequate fire-breaking is essential and fire fighting equipment must be on hand for the burn. Adequate manpower must be present at all times and the burn must be monitored until it is out. Remember if you light a fire – you are responsible for all the consequences and costs to extinguish. You are likely to be prosecuted if you don't follow the minimum permitted standards.

HARVESTING

Harvest time is now upon us. Check your machinery and equipment. Check for build-up of dry vegetation under machinery that may ignite. Watch for sparks. Always carry fire extinguishers. Sacks and shovels on hand can be helpful if a fire breaks out.

SUSPICIOUS FIRES

Although the causes and origin of most fires are known, some significant fires have unknown or suspicious origins. Some are lit deliberately by arsonists and others by children playing with matches or fires.

Fire is the responsibility of us all and careless use can put lives in danger. If you see people acting suspiciously regarding fires or something that doesn't appear right – report it to the Police, or Park Rangers – depending where you are.

Remember, if you see a wildfire, report it by dialling 111.

For more information, contact your local rural fire authority or check the National rural Fire Authority website – see “Links” above.