

Land Cleaning and Rural Fire Prevention

With the emphasis on Covid-19 it is easy to forget other important matters than can pose a risk to our safety in Portugal - one of these being the risk of rural fires.



2020 was a better year as far as rural fires was concerned with less fires but slightly more area burned compared to 2019. So far this year (23rd Feb) there have been a total of 237 rural fires burning 1534 hectares, 98% of which were bush fires.

There is little doubt in my mind that people are more aware of the need to reduce the risk of the spread of fires and indeed fires starting in the first place.

More information is now available in multiple languages, plus the increasing fines for the non-compliance of fuel management laws, prompted people into action.

According to the national budget law the deadline for fuel management the cleaning of land is **15th March 2021**. However due to the first confinement under the state of emergency the deadline was extended twice – eventually being 31st May. We have been in contact with relevant Government authority concerning this matter and although there is no proposed extension at present, we would not be at all surprised if it were extended.

What has changed since last year?

In our recent discussion with ICNF in Lisbon, the answer is in terms of new laws very little. Following the fires of 2017 there was a plethora of new laws - almost impossible to keep up to date with. This year we expect the annual publication of the list of high risk fire areas, very shortly. Some will be added and others taken away depending on the conditions in the areas concerned.

The other thing that changed since last year is that it has been a generally wetter winter with some improvement in drought conditions. With more rain than usual this winter has meant that vegetation is damper and less susceptible to the spread of fires. However as usual the risk will increase as the weather becomes warmer and dryer.

What should residents now do?

Please see our top 10 Checklist which we advise you cut out and keep handy.

Regarding neighbouring land which is overgrown and in the event of non-compliance, report this to the GNR as soon as possible. All complaints, where verified as a fire risk, are acted up on a priority basis! So do not

delay. This is an issue which can cause problems especially if the owner does not live there. If it is not cleaned you should report to the GNR. By May 31, 2021, city councils must guarantee the performance of all fuel management works, and must replace the owners and other forest producers in default, proceeding with the fuel management provided for by law.

High risk fire areas

These are identified each year as priority parishes for the purposes of monitoring fuel management (Land cleaning). The law was passed on 26th February 2020 by the Assembly of the Republic reference, is still in effect but this will be updated we expect in the next in early March.

Last year apart from the changes in the municipalities concerned listing some 1200 High risk areas, there was a change by introducing only one class of priority areas; where before it was classes 1 and 2.

Fuel Management

If the 15th March deadline remains then the inspection of the cleaning of lands adjacent to buildings (i.e. in a range of 50 meters); and for clusters and industrial areas (in a range of 100 meters) will be carried out between 1st April and 31st May.

A dedicated line for information on matters such as land cleaning and all issues concerning protection measures is **808 200 520**. Use this also for registering to burn debris or contact your local Camara or register on-line through www.icnf.pt

Enforcement

When it comes to enforcement will be based on common sense and much of this will be focus at the priority areas identified. **The GNR began on 22nd, February, the Monitoring and Awareness phase to prevent risk behaviour and raise fuel management awareness in order to ensure the safety of the population. This phase, which will take place until March 31.**

Rural Fire Prevention and Protection

Top 10 Action List

1. **Check** if you are living in a high risk fire area
2. **Undertake** land cleaning without delay – if advice is required contact local civil protection or Hotline 808 200 520 – Remember deadline 15th March
3. **Neighbouring land** – if it poses fire risk, and cannot be resolved contact GNR as soon as possible
4. **Prepare** your house by cleaning roof, terraces, leaves from gutters etc
5. **Controlled burning** of debris- Ensure registration, authorisation/permit is obtained before and follow safety regulation
6. **Familiarize** yourself with self-protection measures under Safe village – Safe People Program
7. **For those** in high risk areas – prepare or update an Emergency Evacuation Kit
8. **Emergency Contact numbers** – keep at hand
9. **High risk areas** – Familiarize yourself with village and evacuation plans and assembly points. If none identify and escape route and safety point.
10. **Developments** - Keep up to date through: ICNF,ANPC,IPMA websites and that of SCP

Burning land and debris

Over half the fires in 2019-20 were caused by burning of debris and extensive burning getting out of control. Many people clean their land by burning stubble (extensive burns) or by burning heaped and piled debris. As the uncontrolled use of this last year caused over half of the total fires, it is important to register with ICNF (where you can obtain assistance) and secondly if you are doing this yourself follow the important safety measures.

How you can help

We all need to do our part, by sharing these important messages, reporting overgrown neighbouring land and of course keeping our own land in order.

Please share the safety information from our Safe Communities Portugal Facebook page so it reaches the widest audience. Detailed information can be downloaded from the Safe Communities Portugal website (Civil Protection/Rural fires/Land Cleaning).