

Living with Rural Fires

By the time you read this article, the Critical Fire Period will be upon us. Let us hope that we do not experience the tragic fires of last year that resulted in the death of so many people and the destruction of over half a million hectares of land and the loss of property and livelihood.

But this requires much more than “hope”. We live in a hot and dry country and it is a sad fact that there will always be the risk of fires – so it is important that much more is done to reduce the risk to our neighbourhoods and our homes.

Of course we also need to focus on preventing fires starting in the first place – but without being defeatist with the climate and topography of many parts of Portugal, not to mention the overgrown state of much of the country and human negligence fires are an inevitable part of the lives of many people living in the country.

Fuel Management

We have gone through a period since the start of this year whereby a government led approach has resulted a much greater impetus than has been the norm, in undertaking fuel management – i.e. the cleaning of land. Unfortunately a rather ridged approach in imposing a 50 and 100 metre fire protection range regardless of individual circumstances, together with mixed messages on what land cleaning actually means, has resulted in confusion among many, plus the unnecessary destruction of much vegetation.

There is little doubt that more has been achieved this year – which is good news – but the reason for this has been mainly due to the threat of large fines – double that of previous years. To my mind this is wrong, and is not conducive in inculcating a culture whereby individuals within communities, and communities themselves, take greater ownership of the problem, working together to reduce the risk.

Many readers will be familiar with neighbourhood watch schemes which originated in the USA and are now common in many other countries in help in reducing crime. These work by the community coming together in an effort to identify problems and working with police to help solve them. In Portugal in some areas we have the GNR Safe Residence Program which operates to some extent in the same way.

This model also applies to rural fires. Rather than people feeling helpless and relying on the good work of the fire services, to save their homes, by coming together as a community, they take ownership of the problem and working together and with the authorities take collective action to reduce the risks in the first place.

A new approach

Recently I attended a couple of workshops undertaken by an organization called Landworks from South Africa who, working with the government there, have established a number of Firewise Communities throughout the country. In Firewise Communities protection and prevention is not seen as the responsibility of fire brigades or other fire management agencies; these responsibilities belonging to everyone in the community.

The Portuguese government concerned with issue of rural fires decided towards the end of last year to seek assistance from certain overseas countries in terms of both prevention and

protection measures. Teams have since visited Portugal to share their vast experience, explain various programs which they undertake, with a view seeing what measures could be introduced in Portugal suitably adapted for local conditions.

Safe Communities was invited by the Government to work with the visitors from South Africa. I have to say having done so, and maybe because of my back ground in community policing, I found their whole approach inspiring and refreshing. Whether their approach is formally adopted here remains to be seen, a major challenge being adapting from a “top down” approach to a “bottom up approach, under the umbrella of the Safe Village – Safe People program.

Safe Village – Safe People program

The Safe Village Safe People program was recently introduced in Portugal covering both prevention and protection. In case there is any doubt of the difference between the two is that “prevention” is the steps undertaken through fuel management and awareness sessions etc. and “protection” is the steps that should be taken should a fire break out. Regarding the former, there has been much written on this subject, so I will focus more on protection under this program.

The Safe village Safe People program is aimed at people living in what is known as the urban-forest interface. Basically these are locations laying between forests and the urban areas. Much of the northern part of the Algarve is classified as such. The program is aimed at:

Firstly protection of agglomerates (a cluster of houses) these are actions aimed at the management of protection zones for agglomerates located at the urban-forest interface, in order to reduce the possibility of buildings being affected by rural fires.

Next is prevention of risk behaviour; these are awareness-raising actions aimed at reducing the number of ignitions caused by fire-related risk behaviour, namely through negligence

Thirdly is Awareness by informing communities about the current rural fire risk and the self-protection behaviour to be adopted in the event of the possibility of approaching a rural fire; and lastly the Evacuation of agglomerates, namely actions to prepare and carry out a spontaneous or deliberate evacuation of a cluster when a rural fire is approaching.

As part of evacuations work is being taken to select and prepare spaces or buildings of a particular cluster to serve as a shelter either indoors or outdoors during the passage of a rural fire, in cases where it most feasible or the only possible option.

Clusters undertaking these programs become known as Fire Adapted communities.

A crucial part of the scheme is identifying and appointing local security officers, one for each cluster who is the focal point in the cluster, resident in it and who voluntarily acts as a facilitating agent between the Municipality / Parish and the remaining population of the community, undertaking the measures under the program and disseminating information.

More information about this can be found on the Safe Communities Portugal website www.safecommunitiesportugal.com : Civil Protection/Rural Fire/ During Fires

Landworks website is at: <http://landworksnpc.com/>

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