



By Wednesday afternoon, the fire at the woodchip mound where it all began was almost totally extinguished thanks to the powerful Rural Metro Jo'burg fire tender

Tony Roberts

# Billions lost

## Dave Savides

NCT is counting the cost of Saturday's fierce fire that continues to consume the remnants of its woodchip stockpiles...and it runs into billions of rands.

While the co-op has pledged to rebuild the mill and to protect the jobs of its 180 Richards Bay employees, the picture remains a dismal one.

"Loss of business is grave for us. We have turned away vessels right outside the port and one en route from China," NCT Forestry Co-operative Ltd general manager Danny Knoesen told the Zululand Observer.

"We estimate the stock loss of logs and woodchips to be around 180 000 tons. It is likely that we will not be able to service more than 10 vessels in the coming months.

"The company services up to 26 vessels a year out of Richards Bay, with cargo value ranging from R50m to R80m per vessel.

"We will definitely rebuild. We will evaluate what is salvageable and look to rebuild a chipping line as soon as possible and then leverage that to restore a second line.

"We think we could be running one chipping line in 6 to 8 months.

"It looks like all our conveyor systems, screening buildings and overhead gantries are severely damaged and unusable. The chipper buildings look intact with limited damage, while some wheeled equipment and a few log loaders were saved.

"Our losses to stock, structure and buildings may end up costing a billion rand. We will lose between one and two billion rand in revenue.

"The small growers' ability to find a market is a concern and we will see what is possible with alternatives. Trees do continue to grow as an asset but cash flow for small growers will be challenging," said Knoesen.

Having accepted that the NCT stockpiles could not be saved, the company ploughed most of the firefighting efforts onto protecting those of

neighbouring mill TWK.

"Although we compete with them keenly in the woodchip market, we always collaborate in industry matters and regularly work together," said Knoesen.

He added that he was happy with the municipal response, in terms of firefighting and support from the mayor, municipal manager and his structures.

"We have been working hard to create stability. Monday night was very challenging but every 24 hours we get through without further spreading is a very positive progression.

"In spite of wind we have prevented the spread of fire across to TWK using the aerial bombers and ground fighters, both holding the heat and embers at bay, and creating a suppressing layer on the untouched wood chips.

The wind will still present a challenge for the next few days."

NCT faces losses of billions of rands

By Wednesday afternoon, significant progress was reported, with the woodchip pile where the fire began now 'flattened' by the firefighters.

"We cannot express adequately our gratitude to the surrounding community, businesses, the port, the municipality, companies such as Bell, South32, Mondi, RBCT and too many others to mention," said Knoesen.

"We have been inundated with food and water for firefighters, water tankers and much more. NCT and TWK are eternally grateful for the support."

Knoesen said the cause of the blaze is yet to be determined.

"Yes, we will investigate fully. We have video footage we can study. It happened in the vicinity of a stationary conveyor, so we wouldn't want to speculate now."

Meanwhile, in partnership with industry, Cogta, KC District, the Port of Richards Bay and many other role players, the City of uMhlatuze on Tuesday set up a Joint Operations Command centre which will meet twice daily to assess the ongoing fire situation, followed by media briefings and Q&A sessions.



Working on Water's Kishugu chopper added tremendously to the firefighting capability

Tony Roberts



Tony Roberts of the Zululand Fire Protection Association has been on the ground all week co-ordinating the flights of fixed wing and chopper 'water bombers' that prevented the spread of the blaze from spreading to TWK stockpiles

Dave Savides

## Smoke inhalation a serious issue, says RBCAA

### Dave Savides

WHILE the thick smoke clouds enveloping Richards Bay allegedly pose no health danger to the public, this has been hotly disputed.

At a Joint Operations Committee press briefing on Tuesday, King Cetshwayo District municipal manager Philani Sibiya said his air quality experts had informed him that the smoke presented 'no problem'.

He did, however, recommend that those who experienced respiratory complications should wear masks, as during the Covid pandemic.

"It is disturbing and preposterous for anyone to imply that the emissions from the burning NCT woodchip stockpiles are not posing a health risk to the community," said Richards Bay Clean Air Association (RBCAA) director and communications officer Sandy Camminga.

"When wood is burnt, the combustion reaction produces heat and emissions in the form of water, organic vapours, gases, and particulates.

"Emissions of concern would be carbon monoxide (CO), carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), sulfur oxides (SO<sub>x</sub>), and nitrogen oxides (NO<sub>x</sub>).

"The World Health Organisation (WHO) documents that particulate matter is capable of penetrating deep into the lungs and entering the bloodstream, causing cardiovascular and respiratory impacts, for both long-term and short-term exposure.

"In 2013, particulate matter was classified as a cause of lung cancer by WHO's International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC).

Several of the RBCAA's ambient monitoring stations recorded significantly elevated particulate levels in the residential areas.

The highest concentrations were recorded from late Saturday afternoon into Sunday, with levels remaining elevated in various areas.

"A major concern for the RBCAA has been the proximity of the fire and the risks posed to the Foskor fertilizer plant, which is a major hazardous installation. In our engagements with Foskor, they have assured the RBCAA that they have implemented measures to mitigate the risks and that they remain vigilant," said Camminga.

"The RBCAA commends businesses, the community and emergency services that have given selflessly and continue to work tirelessly to contain the raging fires.

"While this unfortunate and catastrophic incident has once again shown the strength and community of the people of this city, it has also exposed significant weaknesses and failings in disaster management in a city that is home to several major hazardous installations."