GOVT ISSUES FOREST FIRE ALERT

BY CAROL KASUJJA

The National Forestry Authority (NFA), a government agency in charge of forests in the country, has issued a warning over possible fire outbreaks in forested zones due to harsh climate. The dry and windy weather is likely to provoke fires, the authority warned.

The most at risk areas are Mubende, Luwero, Nakasongola, Nakaseke, Mityana and Gulu. Others are Arua, Hoima, Kabale, Kiboga, Ntoroko and some places in Eastern Uganda.

Speaking to *Sunday Vision*, Aidous Obedmoth, the plantation development specialist at NFA, said since December last year, most areas have dried up transforming into fire hazards.

"The temperatures are high and humidity is low. We hold about 13,000 tree plantations with the majority being exotic trees, such as pines and eucalyptus. These trees have a habit of dropping too much leaves during the dry seasons. The pines always have under growth grass which dries up in dry seasons. The presence of leaves and grass presents a high risk of fire breaking out," Obedmoth said.

Obedmoth noted that the current dry spell in most part of the country marks the beginning of the first of the two fire seasons normally experienced in the country.



A section of Mabira Forest. NFA has issued a warning over possible fire outbreaks in forested zones due to harsh climate

Michael Mugisa, the NFA executive director, called upon people living near forests to be very careful and avoid using fire without any security measures.

"Many people use fire to destroy rubbish at their homes. They do not know that by burning the rubbish, they are destroying the state of our own soil," noted Mugisa.

Mugisa also explained that though there have not been any fire incident, NFA has put in place measures to sensitise communities living in the forested areas on the need for deterrence, detecting and fighting of fire outbreaks.

"We have dug around the plantation fire lines to control fire from damaging the plantations and nearby areas. If the fire starts from the neighbourhood, the fire lines will stop it from spreading to the plantations," said Mugisa.

He also advised adults to sensitise children and not to leave them to play reckless games during the dry season.

"Those who smoke should be careful where they drop the stubs. Those preparing gardens and honey harvesters who use smoke should also be careful. And in case there is a fire outbreak, all the community members should join hands to put it out," Julie Mubi, the NFA spokesperson said. The public has been asked to urgently report fires and possibility of fires to the nearest NFA office or through Police hotline numbers 0800121222/0800199399/0 711042193. The authority fire officials also called upon government to buy serious fire equipment like fire fighting helicopters other than fire fighting trucks, which are slow.

Asked whether the fire brigade team is ready, Joseph Mugisha, the director of fire and rescue services, said they were aware about the vulnerability of forests and national parks so they were on high alert.

"We have put up special units to focus on forests, sugarcane plantations and game parks because of the dry season. Wild fires are quite common during this time. We have acquired equipment to help us fight the fire and it is in our grand plan to get fire-fighting helicopters," Mugisha noted.

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