

18th December 2003

The Honourable Ms. Penelope Beckles, Minister of Public Utilities and the Environment
The Conservator of Forests.

The Honourable Ms Joan Yuille Willians, Minister for Community Development and
Culture.

Dear Madam,

Protection of the Natural Environment from Forest and Bush Fires.

The Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club (TTFNC) is a member of a committee of environmental NGOs, chaired by Dr. Victor Quesnel, to assist in the prevention of forest and bush fires, which annually devastate large areas of vegetation. In this effort we have offered to work with the National Fire Planning Committee chaired by the Conservator of Forests.

Every Dry Season we see loss of significant areas of forest, secondary forest, and bush areas to uncontrolled and illegal fires. These fires occur on lands used for forest plantation, natural forest, recovering areas damaged in previous years, and on both private and State-owned land. Probably the worst affected areas are the southern slopes of the Northern Range and south-flowing valleys from the Northern Range, which are adjacent to high population densities and upland squatting. We have not detected any effective efforts to prevent or combat such fires, which sometimes burn for days without attention from State Departments. We are aware of course that such fire damage to the environment occurs throughout Trinidad and Tobago and are often the result of deliberate fire setting by rural populations.

In Wet Season the higher rates of run off from fire-damaged slopes contribute significantly to flooding in the Central Plane areas.

Clearly something must change in the overall national effort to prevent and control this annual problem. We believe there may be a serious omission in current arrangements to tackle forest and bush fires since the problem appears to worsen every year, and would like to bring this to the attention of both of your Ministries.

As we understand the present status of the National Fire Planning Committee, this exists primarily to deal with fires on forestry plantation managed by the Forestry Division, and personnel are deployed to patrol and fight fires detected in these areas. We also understand that commendable efforts are made by Forestry Division to meet with rural

communities to explain the importance of not setting fires in Dry Season. However this protection leaves out non-plantation forest, and private lands. Also the Fire Department is not presently active in fighting off-road fires. Hence a fire burning in scrub or forest, which is outside of any forest plantation area and not immediately threatening any habitation, is generally left to burn freely. It is common knowledge that much of the worst affected areas mentioned earlier fall into this category. We understand that air-borne water dumping devices have been procured in the past and offers have been made to provide expertise, but action has not resulted, possibly due to an absence of allocated specific responsibility.

The best known result, in plain view of the entire population, is the bare or scrub-covered slopes mentioned earlier, upon which little other than fire-resistant Groo-groo trees can survive. These areas in many cases, were stripped of forest generations ago, and cannot possibly recover when subjected to annual, illegal, fire attacks.

We strongly urge the Government to address this gap in environmental protection, and in addition enforce existing laws against squatting, plus the following:

- a) Fires Services Act.
- b) Agricultural Fires Act.
- c) Forest Act.
- d) Environmental Management Act

We would like to work with State agencies in tackling this problem and in this regard wish to advise that we are investigating the possibility of a national publicity campaign to raise public awareness about the seriousness of forest and bush fires and their consequences. It is very important to get this programme in motion before the onset of the Dry Season. Any assistance that your Ministries and other State departments can offer in this respect to such a campaign will be greatly appreciated, either as assistance in the campaign, or as a Government-lead project.

Yours sincerely,

Reginald Potter
President TTFNC

cc:
The Conservator of Forests