

Forest Fires. Aide Memoire delivered to Min Environment. June 2003

10th June 2003

The Honourable Rennie Dumas,
Minister Public Utilities and Environment,
Sackville Street,
Port of Spain.

Dear Sir,

Aide Memoir

Re: “A Call from the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club for Action to Prevent Forest Fires”

Further to our letter dated 3rd May 2003 and our meeting with yourself scheduled for today we would like to leave you with some further information and views related to our letter. Being a voluntary organisation with very limited resources, we cannot offer detailed legal arguments or detailed history of the various issues, Acts of law, and conventions that relate to the environment, but hope that nevertheless this note may be of some assistance.

1. “*Strict enforcement of the existing laws designed to prevent forest fires and the prosecution of persons who breach them*”.

We understand that the legal instruments relevant here are:

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

The powers available under these Acts appear to provide adequate authority to cover most of the actions required to effect significant protection against loss of forest and vegetation cover from fires.

- a) Allows the Fire Services to enter almost any area or property to fight fires or mitigate disasters – (which describes the current extent to which forest cover is being lost).
- b) Defines a fire season as being December to May, requires permits for all fires in this period, states responsibilities of county administrations to control fires by enforcing permits, create fire breaks, appoint fire guardians, disallow any crop on burnt land for two years, enter upon any property except a private dwelling to fight fires, conscript males 18 – 60 years of age.
- c) Requires the Forestry Division to prevent fires from entering forest reserves by suitable means.

- d) Provides powers to apply protection to areas that are declared environmentally sensitive, in addition to the general controls enabled within the Act.

We strongly believe that the problem of fires is related to the failure to enforce existing legislation, rather than the any lack of appropriate powers in existing law.

The TTFNC would like to see tangible evidence of enforcement of these laws and strongly urge that immediate action be taken against offenders who will shortly be planting on burnt land in contravention of the Agricultural Fires Act. The law must be demonstrated by firm action and followed up by similarly strong resolve when firesetters attempt to resume their illegal activity in the next dry season.

2. *“An immediate start to reforestation of newly burnt areas, where possible at the expense of the person guilty of causing the damage to the area.”*

To the average observer, be they professional or amateur, there appears to be a serious lack of serious reforestation in Trinidad & Tobago. Such areas that are under active projects by Forestry Division, or smaller private projects, are directed at commercial planting of specific species such as pine, that do not restore a ‘natural’ habitat and do not nearly match the areas lost annually to fires and other forms of legal and illegal forest destruction.

Reforestation, if done thoroughly is an enormous task that can require funding measured in billions, rather than millions of dollars. However, the neglect of this important restoration and failure to prevent further losses simply increases the enormity of the task.

By concentrating initially on newly burnt areas the problem becomes more manageable and will demonstrate that this is a serious government concern. The longer term plans for older degraded areas should be announced simultaneously however if such a programme is to enjoy credibility.

There are several NGO’s, CBO’s, and private organisations that would welcome the opportunity to participate in a national effort to protect and restore the environment. Leadership and coordination together with appropriate financial assistance from the State is needed to ensure that groups work together in an efficient manner. See also or comments for funding under 5 below.

It is recognised that attempts to fund such at action via penalties levied on offenders is impractical and we do not suggest this as a condition. However there must be evidence of resolve to enforce the law to prevent such programmes falling into abuse by lawbreakers who may try to generate employment by setting fires.

3. *“Immediate implementation of approved National Parks, protected areas and wildlife management proposals.”*

TTFNC recognises that “immediate” and literal implementation of prior National Parks proposals is not possible due to the scale and complexity of these proposals. What we urge

here is that the objectives of these proposals be addressed immediately to the maximum extent possible and implemented via existing laws. The actual proposals require further work and we are alarmed at the absence of evidence of this work.

We believe that by appropriate use of the existing National Physical Development Plan as laid in parliament in 1984 (and we understand to be still in effect as guidance, due to the absence of any formalised replacement), the existing Town and Country Act, the EMA Act, Forest Act, Chaguaramas Act, and the National Trust Act, significant progress can be made towards providing the levels of protection required for the natural environment.

We understand that revision of the proposed Planning and Development of Land Bill , which will in turn lead to a revision of the National Physical Development Plan may currently be in progress and applaud this. But in the meantime tangible protection is required against inappropriate land development, such as the forced industrialisation/commercialisation of rural areas, and whole scale conversion of agricultural lands into housing or tourist and holiday accommodations, with the consequent loss of natural environment, coastal access, and scenic areas.

4. *“A national undertaking, coordinated by responsible environmental groups, to detect and prevent the spread of forest fires.”*

The recent dry season fires have demonstrated clearly the need for this and an apparent lack of importance attached to the problem at official levels. Recent articles in the press have highlighted the large scale burning of forests in Chaguaramas, which is an area under direct supervision of a state agency, and houses military and fire services facilities and personnel. This area is potentially far easier to control than the rest of Trinidad and Tobago, which have been similarly ravaged, so should be a symbol of government determination to protect the environment.

We feel it is essential that there must be heavy involvement at local community level, but joint effort is required with the appropriate State agencies, both in execution, and to win over local participation in the programme and demonstrate benefits to communities and the nation in general. The environmental groups in T&T to a significant extent are members of the umbrella organisation COPE (Council of Presidents of Environmental NGO's). This organisation, with suitable financial support, is one of the options available to provide a practical platform for utilising the expertise of members to coordinate the effort.

5. *“The support of the undertaking at 4 above with both finance and manpower.”*

No policies or projects can be effective without appropriate funding and resources. We do

not advocate the establishment of additional work groups, committees, project teams, State enterprises, ministries or similar ‘overhead activity’ to achieve the objectives outlined here. There are already probably more ‘overhead’ organisations engaged in studies and ‘coordination’ activity than can be reasonably controlled or prevented from overlapping. Please note the emphasis of this document is to concentrate existing legal and organisational structures, but that these need consistent funding from year to year.

The Green Fund was established as an ‘addition’ rather than strengthening the effectiveness and funding of the appropriate existing national structures. In the business sector it remains a deeply unpopular tax, as are the similar Business Levy and Health Surcharge (all of which have remained on the books despite reductions in Corporation and Income taxes). TTFNC is a strictly non-political organisation so does not want to enter officially into these debates, but must nevertheless be aware of such national issues. We thus are reluctant to advocate policies that depend on the continuation or cancellation of such fiscal measures.

However we are aware that the Green Fund having now been levied on local businesses for several years has accumulated considerable capital (at least in formal accounting) without the corresponding disbursements as required under existing law. As a practical short-term measure, we strongly urge that these funds be directed urgently at restoration of the environment, particularly forest restoration. Accepting the need for proper controls, we believe that there are already existing CBO’s and NGO’s with the capability of reforestation. Also we want to stress that this is not a proposal to establish any politically driven or government based CBO’s to receive such funds.

Obviously there is the need to establish proper budgeting and funding of State entities already in place with these long-term responsibilities, quite outside of the Green Fund.

- 6. “Allocation of a defined budget sufficient to cover the cost of education in fire prevention, surveillance of forests to detect fires, and machinery and manpower to extinguish forest fires. This budget should also include a renewable emergency fund that is available at the beginning of each dry season for the fighting of forest fires.”***

We believe that this is self-explanatory. Protection of the environment is an essential component of recurrent expenditure in the National Budget, and should not require capital project approval or external funding subject to special debate.

- 7. “The development and execution of an awareness programme to explain the negative effects of forest fires to communities in fire prone areas. This programme should not only encourage community participation in the prevention and control of forest fires but also lead to greater emphasis being placed on the importance of environmental protection in school curricula. A prerequisite to this programme should be the elaboration of a report that accounts for the impact of forest fires, past and present, on the economy of Trinidad and Tobago.”***

This is an area in which NGO's and CBO's can be actively and effectively involved by sharing components of such programmes between direct government, and non-governmental organisation.

We see the need for inclusion of a strong message on the many aspects of environmental awareness and protection in the national primary and secondary school curricula. Information available to us indicates that one obstacle to this is the current saturation of national curricula, which has resulted in the regrettable removal of geography as an essential early secondary school subject, and replacement by social studies. Without entering into detailed debate on education we must stress the importance of conveying the essentials of environmental stewardship to the nation's youth for the long term benefit of all.

Finally, in common with most responsible environmental groups worldwide, we must urge the government to address the matter of national population. By definition, virtually all environmental problems are man made, and without proper management can escalate disproportionately to population increases. As a small twin island nation we feel the effects of geographical limits earlier than larger nations. Along the road of development we all aspire to similar improvements as measured by criteria that include nutrition, health, education, security, ethical standards, political freedom and equity, wealth, and quality of life. However such advances come at a price, since the wealthier and more mobile population effectively utilise more of the available space and facilities. We see evidence of this daily in traffic jams and over-stretched public facilities regardless of increased rates of public expenditure. The natural environment cannot withstand the onslaught of the shear weight of increasing human numbers and mobility without ever more stringent protective measures. In this enlightened age it is evident that to achieve real 'development' progress the government must take steps to limit population growth, eventually to the point of achieving reduction, if real quality of life improvements are to be made. We sincerely hope that the government has the fortitude to face this as a national priority however politically sensitive it may be. While advocating the measures outlined in this note we feel duty-bound, as conservationists, to stress that neglect of the problem of population growth has the potential to negate the effects of all such recommendations.

Having outlined the views and action calls above, we accept that TTFNC is one of several organisations and individuals qualified by way of knowledge and experience to make such observations, and we are well aware of the importance of communication as an essential step towards successful implementation. Without any suggestion of reducing the urgency of addressing these matters we are of the view that this must be done with full consultation via suitable forums.

Yours very truly,

I.R. Potter
President, Trinidad & Tobago Field Naturalists' Club.