

CHARGES FOR THE ISSUE OF PERMITS TO BURN DURING RESTRICTED AND PROHIBITED FIRE SEASONS

Introduction

The Ashburton District Council is a Rural Fire Authority appointed under the Forest and Rural Fires Act 1977.

Within this legislation there is provision for rural fire authorities to declare Open, Restricted or Prohibited fire seasons, depending on the fire danger level at the time. Further provision allows for conditions to be imposed in relation to the lighting of any fires in the open air during any or all of these seasons and for the issue of permits to assist in ensuring compliance.

Each rural fire authority is free to set its own conditions and consequently these can vary considerably between fire authorities.

Each summer, usually about mid December but dependent on fire danger levels, the Council declares a restricted fire season for that part of Ashburton district for which it is the rural fire authority. During these restricted seasons the burning of agricultural crop residue is permitted without a permit providing specific conditions are complied with. For the burning of any other material in the open air it is necessary to first obtain a permit from the rural fire authority.

When fire danger levels become extreme a prohibited fire season may be declared. Under this regime there is still provision within the legislation to issue special permits to burn.

Discussion

Each year during the restricted fire season a small number of permits are issued by the Council allowing for the urgent burning of tree slash and other heavier material only where it is safe to do so and subject to a number of conditions. As stated earlier, permits are not required for the burning of crop residue during restricted fire seasons.

During a prohibited fire season when conditions are more extreme, all burning activities require a permit. It is the issuing of permits to burn during a prohibited fire season which has the potential to create a significant demand on Rural Fire Officer time. Currently there is no charge to recover the cost of this service.

Over the last ten years prohibited fire seasons have been declared by the Council on two occasions, in 1998 and 2001. The 2001 prohibited fire season extended from March 26 until 9 May.

While the declaration of a prohibited fire season is a relatively rare occurrence, when it does happen it places considerable pressure on the arable sector of the district in relation to clearing crop residue to continue their annual farming rotation.

In recognition of this fact, and in situations where the risk presented by a controlled crop residue burn subject to a number of conditions is considered minimal, permits to burn may be issued and all conditions of the permit monitored to ensure compliance. Prior to issue of the permit a site inspection is carried out and all conditions of the permit are discussed with the applicant to ensure full understanding. These conditions are standard on all crop residue permits and are as follows:

1. The prevailing wind at the time shall not exceed 15km per hour.
2. No fire shall be lit without the permit holder first checking the long term weather forecast, and furthermore, that forecast to show settled weather and calm conditions for at least 24 hours following the time of lighting of any fire.

3. The controlled burn shall be conducted during the hours of daylight only.
4. Immediately following the burn all remaining residue is to be extinguished so that there is no risk of reignition.
5. The area to be burnt shall be fully surrounded by a fire break cleared of all combustible material to a minimum width of 5 metres.
6. The permit holder shall ensure there is adequate fire suppression equipment and/or water on hand, and personnel capable of operating such equipment, to extinguish any wild fire caused as a result of the controlled burn.
7. The permit holder shall stay in attendance until the fire is completely out.
8. The permit holder shall notify the Chief Fire Officer of the nearest Rural Fire Party or Fire Brigade prior to lighting any fire.
9. The permit holder shall notify the Principal Rural Fire Officer prior to lighting any fire.
10. The permit holder shall have current insurances for public liability and fire suppression in place.
11. The issue of this permit in no way invalidates the responsibility of the person lighting the fire should that fire escape and require suppression measures and later be the subject of legal claims for damages.

Because of the extended length of the 2001 prohibited fire season a considerable amount of Rural Fire Officer time was spent on conducting fire break inspections and issue of permits, at no cost to the applicants. This highlighted the need to apply some charge to enable the Council to recover costs incurred in the issue of such permits.

In order to reduce the amount of Deputy Principal Rural Fire Officer time spent on fire break inspections and issue of permits in future, the Council could employ part time staff resources to carry out some of this activity. A permit fee would cover the cost of employing such a person. Part time staff resources were employed during the 2001 prohibited fire season.

A financial cost for permits would also have the effect of eliminating those applicants who do not have an urgent need to burn, thus reducing both Rural Fire Officer work load and the number of unnecessary fires.

Costs involved in the issue of a permit to burn should include Rural Fire Officer time, vehicle running expenses and an administration cost to process the invoice.

The estimated Rural Fire Officer time involved per permit is approximately one hour equating to a charge of \$30 which includes travelling, inspection and discussion of the conditions of the permit with the applicant, and generation of a debtor invoice form.

In some cases an applicant may require a permit to burn multiple paddocks. Where this is the case extra inspection time is involved and an additional charge of \$10 per paddock over and above the initial charge would not be unreasonable.

The emergency management vehicle is currently being charged out at 40c per km. Assuming an average return travelling distance of 30 - 40 km this would equate to a charge out rate of \$12 - \$16 per permit. \$15 as a round figure is recommended.

An administration charge of \$10 to generate the invoice is recommended.

Proposed permit fee to burn during a restricted or prohibited fire season:

DPRFO time	\$30 (1 hour)
Vehicle costs	\$15
Administration charge	\$10
Extra inspections (per paddock)	\$10 each

Total cost per permit ***\$55.00 (plus \$10 each extra inspection)***

Permit issue procedure:

- Application
- Inspection
- Invoicing
- Payment of invoice
- Uplifting of permit

Council accepts the fees as proposed in the sum of \$55 plus an additional \$10 for each extra inspection (paddock) for the issue of permits to light fires in the open air during restricted and prohibited fire seasons.

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