

Okhahlamba Fire and Emergency Services



Okhahlamba Emergency Services' new station in Bergville, KwaZulu-Natal



Okhahlamba Local Municipality is situated in the Uthukela District Municipality in the KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa. Okhahlamba, Bergville Municipality prior to 1994, has a population of 1,8 million people and is a popular tourist destination, known as the gateway to the Central and Northern Drakensberg and attracts both local and international tourists. The Drakensberg Mountains of South Africa or uKhahlamba (the Barrier of Spears) is a 200-kilometre-long mountainous wonderland and world heritage site, making it a tourism mecca for outdoor enthusiasts.

It is home to the highest mountain range in southern Africa, the Drakensberg Mountains and the second highest falls in the world, the Tugela Falls. The Ezemvelo Royal Natal National Park is also a renowned hiking area, rich in natural beauty.

The Okhahlamba Emergency Services was established in March 2014 with an operational area of 2 984 square kilometres and an annual budget of R2,5 million. Its headquarters, which is also the only fire station, recently moved to new premises in Bergville. The fire station also serves as the disaster management centre.

The emergency service is headed up by Superintendent Fredrich (Freddie) Halgreen, who is also in charge of disaster management for the area. We met up with Superintendent Halgreen to discuss the history, achievements and challenges faced by the service.

Background

Okhahlamba Local Municipality is a small town that relies on grants from the province but is slowly becoming self-sufficient and is currently capable of funding some projects by itself.

Okhahlamba never had a dedicated emergency service for the area or

surroundings. The council was lead out of administration after which the municipality was placed under the administration the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA). Municipal manager Siza Sibande, who was appointed three years ago, identified the need for an emergency service and the seed was planted.

Risk profile

We asked Superintendent Halgreen to describe Okhahlamba Fire and Emergency Services' risk profile. "Our biggest risk by far is wildfires that are fanned by high winds. Okhahlamba is ▶



Superintendent Fredrich (Freddie) Halgreen



The Okhahlamba Fire and Emergency Services' team



We were treated to a hot drill



The team demonstrating their capabilities

▶ also prone to lightning storms, floods and snow fall," said Halgreen.

He added, "As we are situated in the Drakensberg, the terrain we operate in is mountainous and dangerous, hence the need to utilise 4x4 and 6x6 fire fighting appliances. Fire hydrants are in non-existence in the rural areas and water needs to be tanked to incidents. We also have the water catchment area of Gauteng in our area which consists of big dams and reservoirs, which frequents drownings. We therefore have a water rescue section."

Operations

As Okhahlamba is such a small service, its size does not allow any member of their team to specialise in any particular field. "If there is a call on hand, then

we deal with the call to the best of our ability and capacity. You will be surprised what nifty ideas rural fire fighters can come up with when faced with a challenge!", said Halgreen.

The service does make provision for air support in the event of runaway wildfire but with a minimum budget, they are unable to utilise it as much as they would prefer.

The most common emergency scenarios that the service responds to annually are rural structural fires and motor vehicle accidents (MVAs) with entrapments. The very narrow roads and remote areas in the Drakensberg are prone to many MVAs. "If we didn't have 4x4 capabilities we would not be able to respond as we wouldn't

be able to reach the incident."

Challenges

As in all small fire services, budget constraints are a huge challenge. With very limited resources and logistics, even the smallest of incidents can become a challenge but these challenges are faced head on and eventually overcome.

Major and unusual incidents

One of the most taxing incidents Okhahlamba had to respond to was a 1 000 square metre supermarket structural fire at 22h45 at night on 12 August 2016. It was very remote with no running water, no fire hydrants, no hose reels, an appliance that carries 3 000 litres of water and the closest water source was 15 kilometres away.

It was on a Friday night with no water tankers available, neither locally nor district. Halgreen continued, "It took seven of us 17 hours to extinguish the blaze but it was done".

Other major incidents included four tornadoes that struck the area in 2015 resulting in a number of villages being destroyed.

The most unusual incident the service responded to recently was a water rescue of a cow that went for a swim through the Woodstock Dam and was drowning. Halgreen explained, "We had the water rescue craft in the water and on scene within 14 minutes and the dam is 37 kilometres from the fire station."

"Another most unusual incident was when we responded to a rescue call at one of the mountain resorts where a honeymoon couple was getting cosy. One of the mattress springs came loose and grabbed the groom's member, pinning him down onto the bed."

Equipment

As with all small municipalities and fire services, Okhahlamba has limited resources available in its arsenal. The service has the bare essentials, four self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) sets with four spare cylinders, 20 hoses, four branches, fire beaters, rescue extrication tools and small foam capabilities. "Just enough to get the job done at the end of the day. But without funding, the future is not rosy as we need much more than just the basics," added Halgreen.

The vehicles include:

- Toyota SRX 4x4 double cab (chief's vehicle), 184 000km mileage kilometres,
- Toyota 4x4 double cab disaster assessment vehicle
- Toyota 4x4 single cab with 500l wildfire skid unit
- Two trailer-mounted 500l wildfire unit, one with foam
- Isuzu 750 4x4 rigid pumper, 5 000l, 300l foam with extrication tools, 4 320km mileage
- Infinity 5,5 metre rigid rescue vessel with two 50 horsepower four-stroke engines
- Toyota double cab rescue unit
- Nissan Tiida general run-around vehicle



The new Isuzu 750 4x4 rigid pumper, 5 000l, 300l foam



The new Isuzu 750 4x4 rigid pumper, 5 000l, 300l foam

When asked whether the equipment sufficient, Halgreen said, "No, not at all. Meetings need to be attended, fire prevention inspections must be conducted, hydrants must be services and checked and administrative duties must be done. We need a minimum of three more light commercial vehicles and a 14 000 litre bulk water supply vehicle with 4x4 capabilities."

Halgreen said that the ultimate or custom fire truck for the station's operations (with no budget limitations) would be a small but strong 4x4 or 6x6 vehicle that can negotiate the mountains with narrow pathways and huge climbs, capable of carrying a minimum of six fire fighters and 6 000 litres of water.

Staff

The staff complement at the station comprises of the fire chief, two leading firemen, six fire fighters and four control room operators. "Two of the fire fighters are female, however, we do not distinguish between sexes or race. A fire fighter is a fire fighter," added the chief.

There are no specialist competencies as it is such a small service that everybody has to do everything.

We asked if the chief felt that he had enough competent staff for the incidents at hand and he replied, "No not at all, I would prefer to have double the staff strength as a minimum."

Training

All current fire fighters have been trained at the Rural Metro Academy in Greytown by the Provincial Disaster Management Centre (PDMC) programme. Constant refresher training programmes are attended as well as in-service training at regular intervals. "We have weekly in-service training and yearly refresher courses at the academy," said Halgreen. "Our in service training is scenario-based so we create our own training situations where we think it may occur or in our station or yard," he added.

Fire safety

With an area that never had a fire service before, compliance to fire

► safety is almost non-existent. With the establishment of the service, awareness and outreach programmes and compliance inspections are now held frequently in order to inform and rectify the lack of awareness. Halgreen added, "These programmes and compliance inspections are although thorough, also informative and we have a very high compliance success rate when the situations are explained and risks identified."

Statistics

1. Population: 1,8 million
2. Size of area covered 2 298 square km
3. Incidents:
Number of MVAs: 140

Total number of fires: 190
Structural fires (formal): 10
Structural fires (informal): 70
Industrial fires: 1
Wildfires fires: 230
Vehicle fires: 6
Other fires: 4
Hazmat incidents: 2
Swift water rescues: 3
Aviation incidents: 2
Structural collapse: 80

Interagency involvement

The station has a good working relationship with the provincial disaster management centre as it is the local disaster management centre and the chief is also in charge

of disaster management for the area. Okhahlamba Emergency Services also has a good working relationship with the local fire protection association and have a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in place with Okhahlamba Fire Protection Association.

Although Okhahlamba Emergency Services is most probably the smallest fire service we have profiled to date, it is of interest how small services have the same challenges as the larger emergency services with the added disadvantage of having to respond to a large area. It is therefore imperative for these small services to be run hands-on, as is the case with Okhahlamba. 