

BE VIGILANT!

THIS IS WHAT CAN HAPPEN IF YOU DON'T TAKE CARE WHEN LIGHTING A FIRE

Aerial attack: Helicopters use monsoon buckets to fight a fire that destroyed almost 600ha, including about 270ha in the Awarua Wetlands, in January last year.

Photo: SOUTHLAND TIMES FILE 623559132

Farmer fined \$1200 after fire destroys conservation land

Courtesy of the Southland Times

A SOUTHLAND farmer yesterday admitted stoking a fire just days before it ripped through more than 250ha of conservation land and incurred a \$500,000 firefighting bill.

Murray Gordon Maxwell, 50, admitted failing to take all reasonable steps to extinguish smouldering vegetation, when he appeared before Judge Noel Walsh in the Invercargill District Court yesterday.

Two charges – taking plants from a conservation area, and setting vegetation on fire in a restricted season – were withdrawn. The matter was originally set down for a two-day defended hearing.

Southern Rural Fire Authority lawyer Barry Slowley said fire services were called to the fire on December 29, 2008, two days after Maxwell had pushed up the vege-

tation heaps using heavy farm equipment to keep them burning.

Attended initially by a rural fire brigade and south Invercargill engines, it soon became clear the fire was a major one, Mr Slowley said.

For two weeks it burned across about 588ha, including about 270ha of conservation land in the Awarua Wetlands, 38ha of pine plantation on Maxwell's property, and 4ha of newly sown swedes on a neighbour's property, he said.

It damaged three maimais, a truck, and an unknown length of boundary fence, Mr Slowley said.

The total cost of the firefighting effort was about half a million dollars, which had been reimbursed by Maxwell's insurer, he said.

Maxwell was liable to a maxi-

mum two months' jail or a fine of up to \$1500.

Maxwell's lawyer, Hamish Evans, said his client accepted he had not taken adequate steps to ensure the fire was extinguished, but had thought it was out.

Maxwell had agreed to pay \$29,650 in weed suppression costs in recognition of the devastation the fire caused to the conservation land, Mr Evans said.

A modest fine was appropriate, he said.

Judge Walsh fined him \$1200.

The fine was applauded by the Southern Rural Fire Authority.

Speaking after the hearing, the authority's principal rural fire officer Mike Grant said he hoped the case educated the public about the importance of being vigilant and responsible.

"It just shows that people have to be vigilant ... and that things that do occur afterwards are still their responsibility," he said.

It was rare for the authority to lay charges under the Forest and Rural Fires Act, but it was essential the public realised the importance of acting lawfully and responsibly, he said. "It's about people needing to be aware and planning their activities at the right time."

After the hearing, Department of Conservation Murihiku area manager Dave Taylor said the Awarua Wetlands were highly valued by the community, and the department took any occurrence of negligence or damage seriously.

He was pleased with the result and hoped it sent a message to others to ensure they were vigilant when it came to fire.

THE FARMER DIDN'T:

- PLAN WELL AHEAD
- TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE FIRE BY KEEPING AN EYE ON IT
- EXTINGUISH THE FIRE WHEN HE SHOULD HAVE

This fire was illegal because his permit had expired.

It burnt 588 hectares and cost \$500,000 to put out – costs the farmer had to pay.

BE VIGILANT AND RESPONSIBLE WHEN LIGHTING FIRES



Southern
RURAL FIRE AUTHORITY