

Written evidence submitted anonymously (CWR0114)

Wildfire risk and response - call for evidence

- How can land management techniques be best used at a regional level to prevent and control wildfires whilst balancing the needs of different land users? What evidence-gaps are there and how can they be filled?
- How best can Defra funding schemes be used to support land managers to adapt to the increased risk of wildfires?

Defra farming scheme payments such as Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) and Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier (CSHT) - the stocking calendars of which are overseen by Natural England - are encouraging farmers to reduce the stocking density of sheep on the hill down to a number that is insufficient to graze areas to the extent that is needed to prevent the buildup of huge fuel loads. The reduction of sheep on the upland habitat of both grassland and peat based heather moors results in an increase of highly combustible material, such as Molinia and Tufted Hair Grasses and long, woody heather being left on the hills from year to year. It is also causing a proliferation of Sitka Spruce, Silver Birch and Gorse to grow, which not only provide a large fuel sources, but also makes access to firefighting difficult. Molinia Grass in particular, which is deciduous and highly combustible, is increasing exponentially each year.

The same Defra farming scheme payments - also overseen by Natural England - are limiting land owners and farmers from the controlled cool burning of heather. It is a traditional practice that has been undertaken safely for hundreds of years (hence the proliferation of peat and heather on the moorland) and, since the fires are controlled, it has not damaged deep peat. Where is the evidence that cool controlled burning does damage it? As a result of the restrictions imposed on the amount of heather burning allowed on deep peat areas, in particular, there is a now buildup of long, dry heather on the uplands. Although, cutting is allowed in those areas, the cost of contractors, fuel and machinery repairs, means that not as much heather is being cut and kept to a low fuel load length that contains more moisture in its new growth as would be safe in fire prevention. An additional outcome of these limitations is that there are now vast unburnt or cut areas of heather on upland moors that have no firebreaks in them.

Defra funding schemes should be changed to financially support landowners and farmers in managing upland moorland using cool controlled burning techniques to reduce the fuel load to a lower amount that contains more moisture. Additionally, they would be burn areas to create firebreaks that will help reduce the impact or wildfires in the event one starting. The funding would support landowners and farmers to purchase more, newer and/or improved equipment that will be used in both preventative measures and to tackle wildfires quickly and effectively if they do occur.

- What role do nature-based solutions, such as improving biodiversity and more resilient landscapes, have in the prevention and control of wildfires?

Natural England believe that the nature based solution of creating wetland areas will help prevent wildfires. Unfortunately, this does not work well on steep upland moors as water does not collect there. Additionally, wetland areas become much drier in the summer - especially in the drier summers that we are getting with global warming. A wetland area on a moor in Inverness-shire which suffered an enormous moorland fire in the summer of 2025, was completely burnt out and did not have the resilience effect that was expected. That does not mean that it should not be tried, as an additional support mechanism to wildfire control but it should not be the whole target for controlling upland moorland fire prevention to the detriment of other, proven effective practices such as effective grazing numbers and cool controlled burning.

- What impact does the monitoring of wildfires have on our understanding of the causes and risks of these events in the UK, and how can this be improved? Are there international examples or best practices that can be used in a UK context?

There can be no doubt that climate changes such as warmer temperatures, lower precipitation, longer dry periods and higher wind speeds have increased the likelihood of and difficulties of controlling wildfires in the UK. There are a number of countries who have studied and offer solutions and best practices in their prevention and control. In southern Europe, especially in Portugal there is a massive problem of wildfires, particularly in vast rural areas that are covered in Eucalyptus Trees. In the article “Forest fire causes and prevention strategies in Portugal: Insights from stakeholder focus groups” they give some of the causes; “In general, the occurrence of forest fires worsened in the second half of the 20th century, especially due to changes in land use which aggravated fire hazards and disaster potential (Meira Castro et al., 2020). These

changes include the abandonment of rural areas, prolonged protection of forestlands from fire, and the growth of extensive wildland–urban interface areas (Montiel-Molina, 2013; Rigolot et al., 2015).”

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1389934124001849> In Portugal now they have legislations that land owners “must” create fire breaks in their forests and woodland or face huge penalties.

Australia also has a bad record for bushfires - especially during the droughts of 2019 and 2020 in New South Wales. Factors included dead and live dry fuel sources, soil moisture sources and windspeed. Additionally, during that time their Government started to fine the traditional practice of controlled burning of brash that was around a rural homestead area. Unfortunately, the lack of fire break of fuel load around the homesteads made the impact of the bush fires worse for both citizens and wildlife.

<https://agupubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1029/2020EF001671>

California also is prone to wildfires, which is discussed in a Penn State research paper called “Q&A: Causes, spread and solutions for California’s wildfire crisis.”

In it it states that wildfires are on the increase not only to due to climate change but to “century-long fire suppression and changes in land management”. It also states that to tackle wildfires California uses “remote sensing and satellite monitoring ...(to) provide real-time data on fire location, size and intensity. These tools help identify new ignitions and monitor fire progression, even in remote areas. Thermal imaging from drones and ground-based radar complements satellite data, offering high-resolution insights for on-the-ground operations.” Additionally, “There have been many controlled or prescribed burns implemented to reduce excess vegetation, like thinning dense forests and clearing underbrush, to mitigate fire severity.”

<https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.psu.edu/news/research/story/qa-causes-spread-and-solutions-californias-wildfire-crisis&ved=2ahUKEwjI78CNx7SUAxUNW0EAHTvwHhoQFnoECBsQAQ&usg=AOvVaw3jmZfdd7eypIJs7trMQUDs>

The UK Government would serve its citizens, wildlife inhabitants and habitats well by creating a joined up approach to researching what other countries do and following their advice and best practices.

- What resources and training do emergency services and local authorities need to respond to the increasing number of wildfires, particularly in rural and hard-to-reach areas?

The fire services depend heavily on gamekeepers and farmers for tackling wildfires as they know the terrain and have all of the necessary equipment that can navigate uneven, boggy and rocky terrain as well as have the experience to operate the equipment to deal with fires. Such equipment includes tractors, swipes and Argocats with “flogging” units in them. Additionally, gamekeepers are experienced in controlling the spread of moorland fires. If burning on heather upland moors is completely banned, landowners and farmers will dispose of these vehicles and will lose the necessary expertise of gamekeepers and farmers in operating these vehicles and using them to control moorland fires. If these vehicles are disposed off there will be less resources available to firefighting teams to tackle wildfires. It would be advisable for fire fighting teams in all areas of upland moorland to have training in using and access to similar vehicles such as Unimogs and Argocats.

- What are the most effective activities for tackling the human causes of wildfire ignition, for example public engagement and campaigns? How can the UK Government best support the delivery of these activities at both a local and national scale?

There should be a total ban on open fires and barbecues in upland heather moors all year round. Disposable barbecues should be banned altogether, as no-one ever takes them home and they are left unattended and smouldering. The same occurs with people who, deludedly, believe that rocks placed around a fire that is built on peat will stop a fire from spreading. Government department information signs on the dangers of starting any fire on peat heather moorland should be placed at all access points to the moor. These signs should include phone numbers to report fires that are underway and to report people who are starting fires or using barbecues. They should also state that arson is an offence that is penalised by law.

A public engagement campaign should be promoted and publicised on TV by a trusted celebrity who knows about the impact of fire on the environment, such as Sir David Attenborough. People should be made aware that uncontrolled moorland fires will damage or kill plant species that grow in peat, such as orchids and sphagnum moss, as well as all moorland wildlife including rare species such as slow worms, adders, curlews, lapwings and other red listed birds. They should also be shown the impact that it has on the living conditions and damage to property that it has on local human inhabitants. Economic factors of uncontrolled moorland fires extend, not only to the farmers and landowners livelihoods and possessions, but the displacement local inhabitants and ruining of their property.

- What policies are in place, or are needed, to reduce the severity of wildfires and their socio-economic impacts on both agricultural land and at rural-urban boundaries?
- Given that responsibility is spread across government departments and bodies (e.g. Defra, Forestry Commission, MHCLG), how should the government coordinate a cross-departmental approach to tackle the increasing risk of wildfires?

The main thrust of what is needed to be done to facilitate the controllable elements of preventing and controlling wildfires in the UK is to reduce the combustable fuel load. This should be done through cool controlled burning and the eating of vegetation by adequate numbers of sheep. All governmental departments such as Defra, Forestry Commission, Natural England, MHCLG and fire departments should be working together already on a cross-departmental approach to tackle the increased risk of wildfires. If this is not already the case ... why not?

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