

Written evidence submitted by the National Trust (CWR0211)

Evidence submitted by the National Trust to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee

15 May 2025

With our staff, members, volunteers and supporters, the National Trust is the biggest conservation charity in Europe. We protect and care for places so people and nature can thrive. Many millions share the belief that nature, beauty and history are for everyone. So we look after the nation's coastline, historic sites, countryside and green spaces, ensuring everyone benefits. For everyone, for ever.

1. Introduction

1.1 The National Trust welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee's inquiry into the growing threat of wildfires. This is an issue of increasing significance for the places and the communities we work with.

1.2 The Trust cares for over 250,000 hectares of land, more than 890 miles of coastline, and a significant number of internationally important habitats including peatlands, heathlands, woodlands and grasslands. Many of these landscapes are among those most vulnerable to wildfire risk.

1.3 As a major landowner and manager, we have direct operational experience of both preventing and responding to wildfire incidents. We work closely with Fire and Rescue Services, statutory agencies, tenants and neighboring land managers, and we undertake wildfire risk assessments across our estate where appropriate.

1.4 We are already observing the impacts of climate change across the places in our care. Increasingly frequent periods of drought, higher temperatures, and more extreme weather patterns are contributing to heightened wildfire risk. Our own analysis and mapping indicate that over 70% of the places we care for are projected to be at medium to high climate risk by 2060, including from wildfire. In this context, wildfires represent a significant and growing threat to people and communities, nature, cultural heritage, and the wider rural economy.

1.5 The National Trust's approach is to manage land in a way that increases long-term resilience to climate change and its impacts. Our experience indicates that wildfire risk is best addressed through proactive, landscape-scale management, underpinned by healthy, functioning ecosystems. This is allied with close collaboration with local authorities, Fire &

Rescue Services and other stakeholders to minimise risks and ensure proactive monitoring, management and emergency response.

1.6 Wildfires represent a growing and systemic risk, driven by climate change and land condition. Addressing this challenge will require coordinated national leadership, sustained investment in nature-based solutions and strong collaboration between government, land managers and communities – working with an eye to specific geographical circumstances and solutions needed to manage the risk in different kinds of landscapes.

2. 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?

2.1 Wildfire risk management should be undertaken at scale. National Trust produce Wildfire Management and Response Plans for landscapes at risk of fire. To be most effective these should be produced by individual landowners but considered in the wider landscape context, connected to, and informed by, neighbouring plans.

2.2 Fire Operation Groups (FOGs) exist across England, which bring together stakeholders within a landscape and can facilitate a joined-up landscape approach. Their operation and effectiveness vary but, in our experience, they are more effective at bringing partners together around coordinated signage, and messaging and comms relating to fire, whereas they are less effective at bringing together landscape scale Wildfire Management Plans.

2.3 Land management approaches to fire management often differ significantly between FOG members, meaning it can be difficult to create consensus, but this should not prevent collaboration on fire management planning.

2.4 We would recommend government or local authority funding and support for 'wildfire lead' and chair roles at FOGs. These would need to be placed within independent organisations such as National Parks or Fire and Rescue Services to support better collaboration between land managers and owners, and more joined up fire risk management planning on the ground.

2.5 Our experience shows that improving ecosystem condition is central to reducing wildfire risk. At sites such as Marsden Moor and in the High Peak, programmes of peatland restoration including grip blocking and re-establishing sphagnum have increased the diversity of the vegetation and made the landscapes more naturally wet. Restoration of peatlands leads to improvements in water table height, which increases soil wetness and growth of wetland plants, and limits the dominance of dwarf shrubs and grasses (i.e. heather and molinia monocultures), which favour drier conditions and burn more readily.¹ Rewetting the peat has also led to less intense burns when they do occur.²

¹ [Wildfire Resilience \(1\).pdf](#)

² [Blanket bog vegetation response to wildfire and drainage suggests resilience to low severity, infrequent burning | Fire Ecology | Springer Nature Link](#)

2.6 Planting broad-leaved native trees around the moorland edges and in the cloughs will also provide increased resilience long term by shading out highly flammable bracken and creating a fire belt.

2.7 Best practice would combine these interventions with vegetation management and strategic fire break cutting for the first few years at least to give the interventions a chance to establish and become fire resilient. These actions will have multiple benefits such as helping Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) achieve favourable condition, increasing the resilience of moorland to wildfires and reducing the rate of water flowing off these landscapes.³ Coordinated national monitoring of these techniques would build an evidence base to inform future restoration and fire resilience work and ensure funding is effectively targeted.

2.8 National Trust do not use managed burning as a land management technique to prevent and control wildfire because evidence shows that it is damaging to nature and the environment more widely. As set out in the recent evidence review by Natural England, rotational burning is damaging to peatlands – altering natural vegetation composition by favouring species such as heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) and *Molinia* (a tussocky grass) which diminishes the resilience of peatlands and heathland to wildfire, as this vegetation supports a high fuel load and ignition risk.⁴ The review also shows that vegetation composition change driven by rotational burning in turn impacts hydrological function, drying what would naturally be wetter, more resilient ecosystems.

2.9 The review also states that managed burning results in carbon emissions with 76-80% of above ground carbon stocks lost via combustion and evidence of increased export of dissolved and particulate organic carbon from a catchment after burning. Burning can also impact water chemistry and flow – potentially impacting flood resilience of catchments that experience managed burning. In addition, burning results in changes to characteristic species assemblages of peatland habitats such as invertebrates.

2.10 While there is a strong evidence base on wildfire risk, there remain significant gaps in how that evidence is integrated and applied. In particular, data on land condition - such as peat health, vegetation structure and soil moisture - is not consistently combined with fire risk modelling, limiting its usefulness for operational decision-making.

2.11 There is also a need for more long-term evidence on the outcomes of different land management approaches. Although restoration-based interventions are increasingly recognised as beneficial, further comparative work across landscapes would help to strengthen confidence and consistency in policy and practice.

2.12 Fire risk forecasting tools are improving but remain fragmented and are not always widely accessible to land managers. There is a need for clear, commonly understood

³ [PROTECT NFM](#)

⁴ [An evidence review update on the effects of managed burning on upland peatland biodiversity, carbon and water - NEER155](#)

thresholds that can be used to guide behaviour and management decisions during periods of high risk.

2.13 There is also further work needed around behavioural science and public communications to educate visitor behaviours, especially around reducing higher risk activities that can result in accidental wildfires. This would also look at the evidence on benefits of policy measures such as use of Public Space Protection Orders which have been used by some local authorities to restrict certain activities (e.g. mandate against use of disposal barbecues). Retailers can also have an influence through withdrawing sales of disposable barbecues in sensitive locations, and via stronger engagement and compliance with the British Retail Consortium's voluntary guidance on sale of disposable barbecues.

2.14 Addressing these gaps will require improved data sharing, stronger collaboration between research organisations and land managers, and investment in systems that translate evidence into practical tools – as well as exploring the behavioural measures that could improve prevention. The Trust's own Climate Hazard Map demonstrates the value of integrating datasets, allowing us to identify where risks such as wildfire are likely to increase and to plan accordingly – including where to focus public engagement and communication around hazards.

2.15 In our response we have focussed on UK examples of action. This is because, whilst there are also international examples of land management techniques to address wildfire challenges, much of this evidence comes from very different habitats and systems (largely conifer forests and woodland systems), and should therefore be treated with more caution when applied to a UK context.

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

3.1 Nature-based solutions are central to reducing wildfire severity because they address the underlying condition of landscapes. Healthy ecosystems regulate water, maintain vegetation moisture, and reduce the likelihood of ignition and fire spread. The National Trust has extensive experience of peatland restoration as a nature-based solution. At sites such as Marsden Moor and in the Peak District, rewetting and habitat restoration have significantly improved resilience to wildfire, while also delivering wider benefits for carbon storage and biodiversity.

3.2 Landscape heterogeneity plays an important role. Creating mosaics of different vegetation types can reduce fuel continuity and limit the spread of fire. This approach is being applied across several National Trust estates, helping to break up large areas of continuous, flammable vegetation. These approaches demonstrate that nature-based solutions are not only effective in reducing wildfire risk, but also deliver multiple co-benefits, making them a cost-effective and sustainable component of long-term resilience.

4. How best can Defra funding schemes be used to support land managers to adapt to the increased risk of wildfires?

4.1 Agri-environment schemes to support rewetting, tree planting and vegetation diversification. Defra funding schemes, particularly agri-environment schemes are a key mechanism for enabling land managers to adopt practices that reduce wildfire risk. These schemes should explicitly recognise wildfire prevention as a public good and incentivise actions that improve landscape resilience.

4.2 Funding should prioritise restoration-based interventions, including peatland rewetting and habitat diversification, which are proven to reduce wildfire severity while delivering wider environmental benefits.

4.3 We welcomed the inclusion of specific options within Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier (CSHT) for wildfire risk management, but these are only applicable to forestry and lowland heath parcels. There is an urgent need to expand these to other settings, in particular upland peatland and heathlands. Options that would be useful include payments for writing Fire Risk Management Plans, cutting fuel breaks and creating water sources for fire risk management.

4.4 Mandatory creation and delivery of Fire Risk Management Plans in high-risk areas through CSHT could be a helpful driver in supporting landscape scale fire risk management.

4.5 Landscape scale collaboration should also be supported through funding mechanisms, recognising that wildfire risk extends beyond individual landholdings. Supporting partnerships between land managers can enable more coordinated and effective interventions. Landscape Recovery Schemes present the opportunity to do this and should be incentivised to consider wildfire.

4.6 Better funding for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of management interventions and their impact on landscape resilience would also be welcome.

4.7 Peat restoration is key to creating wet, resilient landscapes. The Government's Nature for Climate Peatland Grant Scheme (running since 2021) has helped to significantly accelerate the restoration of peatlands across England. The scheme is set to come to an end in March 2027, with Defra stating that they expect agri-environment schemes to support peatland restoration going forwards. We are concerned that these schemes, though proven to be effective for peatland restoration, are yet to be well established, and that a change in approach will result in a significant slowing of the trajectory of peatland recovery. A continuation of a bespoke peatland grant would help manage this risk.

4.8 We would recommend government or local authority funding and support for FOG chair roles and/or landscape based 'wildfire lead' roles. These would need to be placed within independent organisations such as National Parks or Fire and Rescue Services to support better collaboration between land managers and owners.

5.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?

5.1 Monitoring of wildfire events and causes is essential to help with more effective and targeted actions, engagements and policy to help reduce incidences. Monitoring plays an important role in understanding wildfire risk, but current systems are fragmented and not always effectively integrated. Data is collected by multiple organisations, including Fire and Rescue Services and land managers, but is not consistently combined to provide a comprehensive view of risk. The National Trust has been developing more integrated approaches to monitoring, including the use of spatial mapping and remote data to assess risk. Our Climate Hazard Map brings together climate projections and site-level data to identify future risks, enabling more proactive planning.

5.2 Emerging technologies also offer opportunities to improve monitoring and early detection. Remote sensing, satellite data and environmental sensors can provide real-time information on conditions such as vegetation dryness or early fire detection and reporting – National Trust have been trialling such sensors at Marsden Moor in West Yorkshire. Wider adoption will require improved investment in technology and innovation and national coordination and data-sharing frameworks.

5.3 Natural England evidence states that across England, where data is available, the main cause of wildfire ignition is ‘campfires’ (49%), followed by management burns escaping control (15%) and barbeques (10%).⁵ In the English uplands the main cause of wildfire is management burns escaping control (68%), whilst the main cause in the lowlands is campfires (56%). This points to the need for stronger legislation on managed burning – especially in the uplands. And the need for targeted and effective engagement with visitors.

5.4 However causes of fire are often not recorded, for example 41% of wildfires recorded on the Fire and Rescue Incident reporting system between October 2023 and March 2025 were recorded as unknown or accidental, while 59% were recorded as deliberate.

5.5 Assessing the damage of wildfires afterwards is important to see what impacted the fire’s spread and how much damage it did. This can inform further land management and fire risk planning. It is often left to landowners to resource this activity.

6. 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?

6.1 Fire and Rescue Services require appropriate equipment and capacity to respond effectively to wildfires, particularly in remote upland areas such as Dartmoor and the Peak District. This includes specialist vehicles and equipment suited to difficult terrain.

⁵ [The causes and prevention of wildfire on heathlands and peatlands in England - NEER014](#)

6.2 Training and collaboration – including multi-partner location-based exercises - is also essential, particularly in understanding how wildfire behaviour varies across different landscapes. The Trust's experience of working alongside fire services highlights the importance of shared knowledge, joint planning, effective site liaison during a fire incident, support during aftermath of event, such as hot spotting and preventing reignition and coordinated messaging and communication with the public during and after an event. Strengthening collaboration between emergency services and land managers would improve preparedness. Local knowledge of terrain, access routes and land condition can play a critical role in safe and effective response.

6.3 Fire and Rescue and Police Services need greater training and resourcing to support their ability to investigate and make prosecutions relating to deliberate and malicious fires. As a land manager who experiences regular fires we find it can be difficult to get Fire or Police Service to investigate, which is a barrier to preventing wildfires, especially given there is an upward trend in incidents of deliberate fire on our land. Having FRS personnel who are able to confidently determine the cause of each fire, and a coordinated approach between FRS, Police (and potentially landowners) to investigating all deliberate or suspicious fires is key to reducing the risk they pose.

6.4 Use of technology such as drones could help to patrol areas at risk of fire. Drone patrols could help deter and prevent malicious incidences of fire and could also potentially collect evidence to aid prosecutions.

6.5 Finally local authorities require resources to enforce public space protection orders. Whilst these orders prohibit fires and open flames in areas that experience fire risk, there is currently little resource for enforcement.

7. 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?

7.1 The majority of wildfires in the UK are caused by human activity, making public awareness and behaviour change essential components of prevention. The National Trust engages millions of visitors each year and has direct experience of managing wildfire risk in high-footfall locations such as the Southwest coast, the Peak District, Pennine moors, and areas of lowland heath such as Studland, Surrey Heaths. Measures including signage, volunteer fire wardens, ranger engagement, and temporary restrictions during high-risk periods have proved effective in reducing risky behaviours and in quicker and more informed fire reporting.

7.2 However, as highlighted in question 4, there are still large gaps in knowledge and insight into how fires are started and who the audiences are that we need to reach to prevent accidental and deliberate fires. We need better reporting and visitor insight to support more targeted and effective communication campaigns and messaging.

7.3 Local interventions are most effective when supported by consistent national messaging. Government has a key role in coordinating campaigns and ensuring that risk communication is clear, timely and widely understood. A good example of this was produced by the Wales Wildfire Board.⁶

7.4 UK Government could also partner with research institutions to better understand the impacts of wildfire, and communicate this work to increase public understanding of wildfire risk and the implications for environmental and public health.

8. 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?

8.1 Whilst we welcomed the extension of the Heather and Grass Burning regulations in 2025 we believe these regulations should go further and prevent burning on peatland of any depth, as well as a change in burn season dates. The Code should also include a trigger to halt managed burning when Fire Severity Index in the UK is high or above. In addition, moving the date of the end of the upland burning season from 15 April to 31 March would help reduce risk level in normal years and bring it in line with the approach in the lowlands.

8.2 There is a need for more nuanced and adaptive consenting on SSSIs from Natural England to help support effective land management for fire risk. For example, we have struggled to gain consent for some fire break cutting within SSSI landscapes. Whilst we understand that caution needs to be applied to prevent long term rotational cutting altering the designated habitats, we believe there should be more site informed decisions taken to support fire break cutting where it is clearly a short term measure as part of a fire risk management plan and sits alongside longer term sustainable practices such as re-wetting peatland.

8.3 While aspects of wildfire risk are addressed within existing policy frameworks, there is currently no coherent approach that integrates land management, planning and climate adaptation. Reducing wildfire severity requires embedding resilience within land use policy, environmental funding and planning systems. In particular, there is a need to address risks at the rural-urban interface, where impacts on communities and infrastructure can be significant.

9. 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?

9.1 Wildfire risk cuts across multiple departments, including Defra, the Forestry Commission and MHCLG, requiring a coordinated approach. Current arrangements can be fragmented, with limited mechanisms for aligning policy and funding.

⁶ [2025-wales wildfire board wildfire wise multi agency communications plan english.pdf](#)

9.2 Strengthening cross-government coordination, including clearer leadership and governance structures, would support a more integrated approach. This should be complemented by strong regional partnerships to deliver action on the ground.

9.3 A Government led national wildfire strategy and action plan would enable the National Trust to contribute and play our part as major landowners to help coordinate mitigation and adaption activities in conjunction with local Fire and Rescue Services (FRS) and other stakeholders. Actions should be standardised and based on robust science, focusing on fire prevention and early detection, considering not only fire risk but the value of ecological restoration and use of natural processes to manage fire and increase the landscapes resilience to fire. Many of our most vulnerable landscapes cover multiple FRS areas and the ability for these teams to work strategically together in terms of preparedness, prevention, and response between them and land managers, with appropriate funding and shared resources, is critical in building resilience to the forecasted increase in wildfire incidents. We know there are good examples of practice and coordination throughout the UK, and learning from these should inform national strategy.

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