

Climate and weather resilience – Wildfires

Submission by Mini workgroups Ltd

Mini workgroups Ltd is a public safety software solutions provider based in Newcastle upon Tyne. Our principal activity is the provision of Team Awareness Kit (TAK) both here in the United Kingdom (UK) and also in the United States. We work with fire departments with significant experience of large scale wildfires and also with forestry management organisations. TAK is the de facto standard tool for multi-agency coordination of wildfire response in the United States, adopted by the US Forestry Service and many state and local fire fighting agencies.

The nature of our work means we operate extensively across the forest and wildland areas of Northumberland and Southern Scotland. We also have experience of the civil disruption caused by storms Arwen and Fergus, which resulted in two 5 day periods without power or mobile telecommunications.

This submission incorporates comments from our firefighting partners in the United States. While most of that experience comes from the South Western United States at latitudes far south of the UK, the recent pattern of wildfires in Canada at similar latitudes to the UK means that similar wildfire experiences here cannot be excluded.

Although wildfires are increasing in frequency and are already proving challenging for local and regional fire and rescue services to suppress, they have, to date, occurred during relatively benign weather conditions. We have yet to face in the UK a high speed wind driven wildfire of the type that is becoming increasingly common in the US and Canada.

This inexperience is likely to lead to an underestimation of the dangers. Smoke on the horizon can become an inescapable inferno within 20-30 minutes. The rural road network in many areas rural areas in the UK lacks the capacity to handle last minute evacuations that are likely to occur.

The key factors in successfully addressing wildland fire risks are: multi-agency, cross department and community engagement, married with prior planning and preparation.

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?

United States experience is that the single most important factor in reducing structure damage in wildland fires is home hardening, to prevent the ingress of wind driven embers and reduce the fuel available in the immediate vicinity of the property – the area described as Zone Zero in US parlance. It should be noted that US structures tend to be more spaced out than the built environment in the UK. A read out from the fire at Wennington in 2022 suggests that structure to structure fire spread in the UK, once a wildfire has cross the wildland urban interface, may be more extensive and more rapid than occurs in the United States and Canada. However, whether this is actually the case remains a knowledge gap.

The removal of fuels from public land, along public corridors where human ignitions are prevalent has proved to be a useful strategy.

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

No comment

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

No comment

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 are many technical solutions to the discovery and monitoring of wildfires. Each has their merits. However, more important is the rapid dissemination of relevant information in a timely and accurate way to: responders, the civil authorities and the general public.

While TAK is the de-facto tool for emergency responders in the United States, the public also need a trusted and tested solution.

Watch Duty is real-time wildfire tracking and alert platform. It utilises a combination of official data sources and human monitoring by experienced volunteers, including active and retired firefighters, dispatchers, and first responders. The service is operated by a non-profit organisation.

We have no connection or contact with that organisation. Nevertheless, we note that it has achieved a high degree of public trust. There is no point in re-inventing the wheel and the adoption of a similar approach here in the UK would seem an appropriate low cost way of improving public safety.

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?

We cannot speak to fire suppression.

An important preplanning activity is collating pre-event map data on water points and good areas to stop a fire.

However, we note that in the North East and Scottish borders many of the new Emergency Services Network (ESN) masts are sited in locations that are vulnerable to wildland fire damage. We would expect in a significant wildland fire for the ESN to be severely degraded. Therefore it is important that all responders have alternate, contingency and emergency back up communications and command and control systems.

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?

Our view is there is a need for more general education on all aspects of civil resilience and that this should be part of the national curriculum taught to all children as part of their necessary life skills in school.

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?

One of the major social impacts in fire prone areas in the United States is the withdrawal of insurance cover on a 'post code lottery' basis, regardless of an individual property's risk exposure. Insurance regulations may be required which reward and encourage property hardening to resist wildfires.

A wildland fire which crosses the wildland urban interface will generate large quantities of hazardous waste mixed with the debris. There needs to be a centralised plan to rapidly clear and dispose of this waste to allow rebuilding and economic recovery.

Planning consent and permitting has proved to be a major brake on post fire recovery. We suggest that in the event of a large scale fire, all rebuilding applications are automatically called in to an appointed planning inspector to be a single point of contact for rapid approval, thereby avoiding a patchwork of inconsistent local authority planning decisions.

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?

It is essential that there is in place, and tested in advance, a common situational awareness capability which allows coordination between all civil contingency category one and category two responders together with the military. One which can rapidly onboard and track users from disparate organisations including civil society volunteers. Without such capability lives will be lost.

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