

Annex B to the Moorland Association submission to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee inquiry: Wildfire risk and response 2026

NEER001 evidence-review guidance extracts

Purpose of this annex

1. This document is Annex B to the Moorland Association's submission to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee inquiry, *Wildfire risk and response*. It summarises relevant extracts from Natural England's own evidence-review guidance, *Natural England Evidence Reviews: guidance on the development process and methods (NEER001)*, 1st edition, May 2013.
2. The purpose of this annex is not to challenge the value of evidence reviews. It is to identify the assurance standards Natural England itself set for evidence reviews, particularly where such reviews are relied upon to inform advice, policy or regulatory decisions affecting land management, fuel management and wildfire risk.

1. Evidence reviews are intended to be systematic and transparent

3. It defines an Evidence Review as "a systematic and transparent bringing together of the best available evidence" relating to an intervention or issue, with conclusions drawn from that evidence to inform "advice, action or policy". It also states that evidence reviews should identify and appraise the best available evidence relevant to the review question and draw evidence-based conclusions.
4. NEER001 says the approach embodies the following principles:
 - transparency;
 - consideration of the full range of evidence, including expert opinion;
 - stakeholder engagement throughout the process; and
 - conclusions and recommendations based on the available evidence.
5. It also says that the guidance provides the default position for Natural England evidence reviews. Where there is good reason to depart from it, the core principles should still be followed, and deviations and their justification should be reported in the review.

Relevance to EFRA

6. Where an evidence review is used to justify restrictions on land-management tools relevant to wildfire risk, the Committee may wish to test whether the review was conducted and described consistently with these principles: transparency, full consideration of evidence, stakeholder engagement, and reported justification for any departure from the default method.

2. NEER001 envisages four stages: scoping, development, validation and publication

7. It describes the evidence-review process as having four stages: scoping, development, validation and publication. Its overview figure shows stakeholder involvement, Evidence Review Group input, draft conclusions shared for comment, final independent quality assurance, Executive Board sign-off, and publication with supporting documentation.

Relevance to EFRA

8. This matters because a review relied upon in ministerial, Parliamentary, regulatory or legal contexts should be capable of being traced through its scoping, evidence-development, validation and publication stages. Where public assurances are made about the robustness or peer-review status of a review, the retained record should identify how those stages were completed.

3. Scoping should be precise, documented and shared

9. It says the review scope should specify precisely the interventions or issues covered. It should include a clear definition of the intervention or issue, background information, assumed mechanisms or causal pathways, settings, exclusions and key review questions. It says the scope is “critical” to keeping the review within agreed parameters, ensuring clarity and enabling completion within agreed timescales.
10. NEER001 says registered stakeholders and members of the Evidence Review Group should be invited to comment on the draft scope. It also says stakeholder comments should be captured in a structured manner, with reflections recorded on how those comments influenced the scope. It identifies stakeholder comments and responses as a key documentation product that should form part of the review archive, and the final scoping document as material to be published as review background material.

Relevance to EFRA

11. For wildfire-relevant land-management reviews, the scope is important because it determines which interventions and outcomes are examined. A review used to restrict fuel-reduction tools should therefore have a clear retained scope, including how wildfire risk, fuel load, suppression difficulty and public-safety consequences were treated.

4. The Evidence Review Group should include independent expertise and declarations of interest

12. NEER001 provides for an Evidence Review Group to be recruited once the review commission is clarified. It says independent experts may be drawn from academic, stakeholder and practitioner communities, and that members should bring a range of perspectives and expertise while drawing conclusions based on the available evidence.
13. It states that Evidence Review Group members may have interests in the outcome of a review, but that members “must be objective in their analysis of evidence”. It says that, in the interests of transparency, all Evidence Review Group members should sign a Declaration of Interests, and that declarations should form part of the review archive. It also says the list of Evidence Review Group members and their affiliations should be included in the final review document.

Relevance to EFRA

14. Where Natural England relies on external expert input, external review or peer review to support a public assurance, the retained record should be clear about who was involved, their role, their affiliation, the nature of their review, and how interests or conflicts were identified and managed.

5. Review questions should be precise, clear and focused

15. NEER001 states that it is “hard to overstate the importance of the questions in a review” because they define the evidence that will be considered. It says the specialist review team must ensure that questions are precise, clear and focused, and identifies the Population-Intervention-Comparison-Outcome framework as a helpful structured approach.

Relevance to EFRA

16. Where policy decisions affect wildfire risk, review questions should be capable of capturing public-safety-relevant outcomes, not only habitat or peatland outcomes. For fuel-management restrictions, relevant questions should include effects on fuel load, fuel continuity, fire behaviour, suppression opportunities, peat ignition and severe wildfire consequences.

6. Evidence identification should be transparent, repeatable and documented

17. It describes reviewing as an explicit, systematic and transparent process. It says the development steps are designed to ensure the process is transparent and repeatable. Those steps include identifying potential evidence, selecting relevant evidence, assessing quality, extracting and summarising evidence, producing evidence statements and applicability, and developing conclusions or recommendations.
18. NEER001 says each review question should have a search plan. That search plan should state the search question, approach and rationale, sources to be searched, additional searches, study types, inclusion and exclusion criteria and any restrictions. It also says the search strategy should be summarised in sufficient detail to enable the search to be replicated.
19. It further says evidence from non-database sources, such as stakeholder-submitted evidence, grey literature and expert opinion, must be documented. Search words, search plans, search strategies and reference-management documents are identified as key documentation products forming part of the review archive or final review documentation.

Relevance to EFRA

20. Where an evidence review is relied upon to restrict land-management tools, Parliament should be able to see how the evidence was searched for, what sources were included, how grey literature or practitioner evidence was handled, and whether the process is capable of replication.

7. Inclusion and exclusion decisions should be documented

21. NEER001 says selecting relevant evidence is a “critical stage” and that inclusion and exclusion criteria must be documented and applied objectively to all potential evidence regardless of source. It says title and abstract screening should normally be conducted independently by two reviewers, with disagreements resolved by discussion or a third reviewer. It also says full-paper screening should normally be undertaken independently by two people.
22. It says the evidence selection process should be clearly documented. It advises that evidence excluded at the full-paper stage should be listed in an annex with reasons for exclusion, and says this should form part of the final review report.

Relevance to EFRA

23. For wildfire-relevant reviews, this is important because decisions to include, exclude or downgrade evidence may affect whether management tools are treated as acceptable, uncertain or harmful. If restrictions are based on such reviews, the Committee may wish to ask whether inclusion/exclusion decisions and reasons are available for scrutiny.

8. Study quality and external validity should be assessed through structured appraisal

24. NEER001 says that “not all evidence is equal” and that assessing quality is a structured approach to identifying whether sources of study bias have been minimised. It distinguishes internal validity from external validity, with external validity asking whether study results are applicable or generalisable to the wider population that is the focus of the review.
25. It says quality assessment is a key stage because study quality ratings are reflected in evidence statements and inform the weight the Evidence Review Group gives to evidence when drawing conclusions. It identifies three steps: categorising evidence type, assessing internal validity, and assessing external validity.

26. NEER001's quality-assessment templates include fields for the name of the evidence review, review question, study citation, study design category and "Assessed by & when". They also include questions on whether source populations or areas are described, whether eligible populations or areas are representative, whether methods of selection are described, whether there are sources of bias, and whether inclusion/exclusion criteria are explicit and appropriate.
27. The evidence-table examples include fields for study details, study design, quality score, external validity, inclusion and exclusion criteria, outcomes, methods of analysis, results, limitations identified by the author, limitations identified by the review team, evidence gaps or recommendations for further research, and sources of funding.

Relevance to EFRA

28. This is central to the evidence-assurance issue. Where an evidence review is used to restrict fuel-management tools, the underlying study-quality and external-validity assessments are not incidental. They show how evidence was weighted, how uncertainty was treated, whether findings were applicable to English upland conditions, and whether contrary evidence was downgraded or excluded.

9. Validation and sign-off should be traceable

29. NEER001 says the Evidence Review Group is responsible for agreeing and finalising conclusions. It then envisages the specialist review team bringing together the final report, including the scope, research questions, evidence statements and conclusions or recommendations. It states that this should be signed off by the chair of the Evidence Review Group. It also says the final report should be presented to Natural England's Science Advisory Committee for consideration and independent quality assessment before being signed off by the Natural England executive.

Relevance to EFRA

30. Where a review is described publicly as having undergone rigorous peer review or equivalent assurance, the Committee may wish to know what validation and sign-off records exist, who completed them, what materials were reviewed, and whether the assurance applied to the final report or only earlier draft material.

10. Publication should include supporting documentation

31. NEER001 says the final review report should be published in line with Natural England's publication standard. It then says that, to maintain transparency and repeatability, "additional background material underpinning the review" should also be made readily available. This includes the agreed review scope, search protocol, evidence summaries, stakeholder feedback proforma and topic review reports.

Relevance to EFRA

32. Where wildfire-relevant restrictions are justified by an evidence review, transparency and repeatability require more than publication of the final conclusions. The underpinning material should be available so that Parliament, land managers, Fire and Rescue Services and affected communities can understand how the review reached its conclusions.

11. Summary of NEER001 assurance benchmarks relevant to EFRA

33. Taken together, NEER001 indicates that an evidence review relied upon for advice, action or policy should normally be capable of showing:
 1. a clear commission and review scope;
 2. review questions that are precise, clear and focused;

3. stakeholder engagement at scoping and validation stages;
4. an Evidence Review Group or equivalent assurance structure;
5. independent expertise, with affiliations and declarations of interest recorded;
6. documented search plans and search strategies;
7. documented inclusion and exclusion criteria;
8. a record of included and excluded studies, including reasons for full-paper exclusions;
9. structured quality appraisal, including internal and external validity;
10. evidence tables showing study design, quality score, applicability, limitations and evidence gaps;
11. recorded handling of stakeholder comments and responses;
12. finalisation and sign-off of conclusions;
13. independent quality assessment where applicable;
14. publication or ready availability of supporting documentation sufficient to maintain transparency and repeatability.

12. Relevance to the Committee's wildfire inquiry

34. The Moorland Association submits this annex because NEER001 provides the benchmark against which evidence-review assurance should be understood. Where evidence reviews are used to justify restrictions on controlled burning or other wildfire-relevant fuel-management tools, those reviews may affect fuel load, fire intensity, suppression opportunities, firefighter safety, smoke exposure, peat ignition, rural businesses and communities at the rural-urban interface.
35. The Committee is therefore entitled to ask whether public assurances attached to wildfire-relevant evidence reviews are supported by a retained, auditable record. That record should show what was reviewed, by whom, against what scope or instructions, how evidence was appraised, how comments were handled, how independence and interests were managed, and when the review was completed and signed off.