The Moorland Association

Beccy Speight
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26 October 2026

Dear Beccy,

Wildfire2026: evidential basis for RSPB contributions on upland wildfire

I am writing about two RSPB contributions listed in the programme for the Wildfire2026 conference in Leeds on 10 and 11 November:

- a presentation by Robert Hughes entitled *"Wildfire resistance and resilience as emergent properties of ecosystem following ecological restoration"*; and
- a research poster by Mike Shewring entitled *"Prescribed burning increases wildfire severity in UK upland moorland."*[1]

The Moorland Association welcomes new research and its proper testing through scientific discussion. We are not seeking to prevent the RSPB from presenting findings with which land managers may disagree. However, the title of the prescribed-burning poster makes an unqualified causal claim that does not appear to be supported by the presently available UK evidence.

This is particularly concerning because Wildfire2026 will bring together fire and rescue services, policymakers, government bodies, researchers and land managers at an important point in the development of national wildfire policy. A categorical assertion presented in that setting may quickly be repeated as an established scientific conclusion, even if the underlying analysis is unpublished, has not been peer reviewed or cannot distinguish causation from association.

The publicly available evidence is considerably more qualified.

[1] Wildfire2026, *Programme: Research Posters*, accessed 26 October 2026: https://ukwildfireconference.co.uk/2026/programme#posters

Natural England's 2025 evidence review, NEER155, concluded that evidence concerning the relationship between managed burning and wildfire in the UK remains limited.[2] It recognised that escaped managed burns can cause wildfires, but did not conclude that properly completed prescribed burning generally increases the severity of subsequent wildfires.

The recent EFRA Committee report, *A burning issue: managing wildfire risk*, similarly records Natural England's evidence that there is limited UK-specific information about the direct effects of vegetation management (including burning and cutting) on wildfire ignition, behaviour, severity and extent.[3] The Committee identified significant gaps in the evidence concerning wildfire behaviour, fuel dynamics and different land-management interventions. The Committee did not take a view on whether prescribed burning, cutting, grazing or rewetting is the best approach and concluded that all have a place in an evidence-based land-management 'toolbox'.

Most directly, the 2026 peer-reviewed study by Lees and colleagues, examining 206 wildfires in England and Wales, found that wildfires in areas managed by burning were significantly smaller than those in unmanaged areas and found no significant difference in wildfire severity.[4] The authors cautioned that the available management data were incomplete and that management effects could not be separated reliably from vegetation type, particularly the relationship between burning and heather-dominated vegetation. The study therefore does not provide a definitive answer, but its findings do not support the unqualified causal proposition currently stated in the RSPB poster title.

Against that background, please would the RSPB provide the following information by **Wednesday 4 November**:

1. The complete conference abstracts for both RSPB contributions.

2. A copy of Mike Shewring's poster and any paper, preprint, report or supporting analysis upon which its conclusion is based.

3. Any corresponding paper, report or supporting evidence underlying Robert Hughes's presentation.

4. Confirmation of whether either piece of work has been independently peer reviewed, submitted for publication or reviewed externally beyond the RSPB.

5. Details of the geographical and temporal coverage, sample sizes, datasets and statistical methods used in the prescribed-burning analysis.

[2] Natural England, NEER155 (2025), particularly its conclusion on the limited UK evidence connecting burning and wildfire.
[3] EFRA Committee, *A burning issue: managing wildfire risk* (2026), paragraphs 149, 160 and 162–177.
[4] Lees et al., *Wildfire size, severity and timing vary with dominant vegetation in open landscapes in England and Wales* (2026), particularly sections 3.3 and 4.3, DOI 10.1002/2688-8319.70254.

6. The definition and measurement of "wildfire severity" used in the study, including whether this concerns vegetation damage, peat consumption, fire intensity, burned area or a remotely sensed proxy.

7. An explanation of how the analysis distinguishes the effects of prescribed burning from potentially confounding factors, including:

    - vegetation type and heather cover
    - vegetation age and fuel load
    - peat depth, hydrology and fuel moisture
    - drainage and restoration history
    - slope and topography
    - weather and season
    - ignition location
    - firefighting, suppression and other estate wildfire-prevention measures

8. An explanation of how the conclusion is reconciled with the Lees study's finding that wildfires on burn-managed land were smaller and not significantly different in severity.

9. Confirmation of whether the two contributions are connected; whether the RSPB endorses the causal claim contained in the poster title as its institutional position; and how both contributions relate to the RSPB's position on wildfire resilience and upland land management.

10. Confirmation that, if the analysis identifies an association rather than establishes causation, the poster title will be amended accordingly. Wording such as "The association between prescribed-burning management and wildfire severity in UK upland moorland" would more accurately reflect that evidential position.

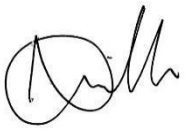
If the work has not yet been peer reviewed, we would also ask that this is made explicit on the poster and in any accompanying conference material, together with the study's principal limitations.

If any of the requested material cannot be provided by 4 November, please explain why and confirm how the research's status, methodology and principal limitations will be communicated clearly to conference delegates.

This request is not intended to inhibit scientific discussion. On the contrary, it reflects the need for particularly careful presentation where research may influence public policy, land-management regulation and decisions affecting the safety of upland communities. The distinction between an escaped prescribed burn causing an ignition and previous prescribed management affecting the severity of a later wildfire is scientifically and operationally important. The two propositions should not be conflated.

The categorical wording now published in the conference programme requires prompt substantiation or correction. If the RSPB cannot demonstrate that the analysis establishes causation, rather than an association affected by vegetation type or other confounding factors, we expect the poster title to be amended before the conference. I look forward to receiving the requested information by 4 November.

Yours sincerely,



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Cc:
Jeremy Wilson, Director of Science, RSPB
Katie-jo Luxton, Director of Conservation, RSPB
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