

LINES TO TAKE – WILDFIRE

Version control

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Headlines

- In the UK, a 'wildfire' is any uncontrolled vegetation fire that requires a suppression response. Almost all are caused by human activity (e.g. arson or accidental ignition).
- Wildfires can have devastating consequences for landowners and for wildlife. The risk and severity of wildfires are getting worse due to climate change.
- Healthy, wet habitats provide natural defence against wildfires. Restored peatland habitats also store carbon, playing a wider role in climate change mitigation.
- We want to work with landowners and local communities to create more wildfire-resistant landscapes. There is funding available to help (e.g. through Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMs)).

Introduction

These Lines to Take (LTT) are intended to be used to respond to both internal and external queries on Natural England's remit and approach to wildfire. They are structured as follows:

- Context
- Natural England's roles and responsibilities

Section 1: Land management and building wildfire resilience

- Natural England's overall approach to building resilience to wildfires
- Protected sites and agri-environment agreements
- Planning for climate change impacts on SSSIs

Section 2: Wildfire incident planning and response

- Fire risk planning and management
- Fire risk monitoring and preparedness
- Wildfire and National Nature Reserves (NNRs)
- Communication and public engagement/awareness raising
- In the event of a wildfire
- Health and Safety procedures (Natural England staff only)
- SSSI wildfire incident reporting

Links to other resources

Context

- Alongside flooding and drought, wildfire is recognised in the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) as a hazard that is likely to occur increasingly frequently due to climate change.
- It is also included in the National Adaptation Programme (NAP3), where measures to build resilience to wildfire are considered and actions proposed involving both Defra and its Arms' Length Bodies (ALBs), including Natural England.
- Whilst naturally occurring 'wildfires' do occur in some countries, almost all uncontrolled vegetation fires in the UK stem from the activities of people. This includes:
 - Deliberate fire setting/arson (a common phenomenon in hot, dry conditions which can prompt 'copycat' behaviours).
 - Careless or negligent use of barbecues, campfires, rubbish burning or littering, inappropriate use of vehicles.
 - Heather, grass or brash burning or other 'managed' fires that escape control.
 - Equipment or electrical faults (for example during harvesting of dry crops).
- The term 'wildfire' – when used in the UK context – refers to all such uncontrolled vegetation fires that require a suppression response.
- Our current thinking is that, unlike other parts of the world, the UK does not have any plants that require fire to complete their lifecycle.

Natural England's roles and responsibilities

- Natural England provides advice to the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and Defra on wider policy issues related to wildfire.
- Wildfire incidents can affect Natural England directly. This includes in our role as owner-occupiers of National Nature Reserves (NNRs), as regulator for protected sites, and as adviser on agri-environment schemes. More broadly, wildfire is relevant to our role in promoting nature recovery and access to the outdoors.
- Our approach to wildfire is two-fold: working to prevent fires happening in the first place (particularly through nature-based solutions); and how to plan if a fire occurs.
- We support research into the causes and effects of wildfire (including the impacts and responses of habitats/species to fire) and the effectiveness of restoration measures to build wildfire resilience.
- We also work with others to address evidence gaps in our understanding of wildfire risk and mitigation measures.

Section 1: Land management and building wildfire resilience

NE's overall approach to building resilience to wildfires

- We are committed to supporting land management practices that restore wider ecosystem health, and these can include measures to increase wildfire resilience.
- We consider that habitat recovery, through the protection and restoration of more natural hydrological regimes (reversing historic drainage and other damage), will support wildfire resilience. For peatlands there is evidence and examples of this in practice (see [IUCN, 2024](#)).
- We acknowledge that wildfire risk (and the extent/severity of wildfires) may change due to changes to land management and climate change. Over the long-term we believe that restoring habitat condition and hydrological function (e.g. through re-wetting) will both reduce the risk and severity of future wildfires.
- We will work with landowners/managers on a site-by-site basis, and over the long-term, to ensure that measures to restore habitats (including re-wetting to build wildfire resilience) are appropriate to local conditions and site characteristics.
- Promoting a complex mosaic of healthy habitats and sub-communities in a landscape can reduce the likelihood of fires spreading rapidly across monocultures (e.g. heather, *Molinia* grasslands).
- While any carbon-based matter can burn if it gets hot enough, some characteristics make healthy habitats and species more resilient. These include wetness (e.g. the peat/moss layer in a healthy bog), coarseness of biomass (e.g. mature broadleaved trees) and variation in structure (e.g. grasslands with varied sward heights, mosaics of different habitats).
- Bespoke actions such as the creation of fire breaks and changing the balance of habitat types may be required in some specific circumstances. Examples include where hydrological restoration supports more mire vegetation, or the creation of small areas of broadleaved trees within a wider heathland landscape.
- Re-wetting of sites that are artificially drained or otherwise drier than they would be (as a result of human activity, e.g. managed burning, overgrazing) will require removal of all pressures causing drier than natural conditions.
- We will consider other measures to improve wildfire resilience where they can be shown to work alongside long-term habitat recovery.

Protected sites and agri-environment agreements

- Measures to mitigate the risk of wildfire on SSSIs are likely to need consent from Natural England. We recommend integrating wildfire management measures alongside actions for wider habitat restoration.
- Fire mitigation measures should be compatible with the special nature conservation interest of sites and actions to achieve nature recovery.
- Where appropriate, we will be flexible and adopt an evidence-led approach tailored to the circumstances of individual locations and site characteristics.
- Environmental Land Management (ELM) supplements and capital items relevant to restoration, which could contribute to wildfire resilience, will be used and promoted where appropriate. These include [CSP2 Rewetting supplement](#), [WN1 Grip blocking drainage channels](#) and [FM2 Major preparatory works for priority habitats \(creation and restoration\) and priority species](#)

- The use of capital item [WF1: Create a Wildfire Checklist](#) will also be encouraged. In lowland heathland and woodland contexts, we will also promote the inclusion of the option for [maintaining fire and fuel breaks \(CUP 18\)](#).
- For Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreements coming to an end, there is the option to access either [PA1 Implementation Plan](#) or [PA2 Feasibility Study](#) to help with the transition to Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes.
- There are also payments currently available through the Nature for Climate Peatland Grant Scheme to reduce the risk of wildfire through habitat restoration.

Planning for climate change impacts on SSSIs

- As part of SSSI condition monitoring, a climate change risk assessment is undertaken as part of the 'Pressures' assessment, using a RAG assessment on a five-point scale.
- Where climate change is identified as a significant pressure (4-5 on the scale), this will trigger the need for an Adaptive Management Plan (ADP). Natural England is currently piloting an approach to ADPs in four case study locations. At least one of these locations is already known to be vulnerable to wildfires.

Section 2: Wildfire incident planning and response

Fire risk planning and management

- We work with partners to improve systems to alert land managers about fire risk and management techniques to improve resilience. This includes through our support and membership of the UK Fire Danger Rating System (UKFDRS) Steering Group.
- Natural England is represented on a number of local and regional wildfire groups in England which help address wildfire issues.
- We encourage landowners/managers to maintain good relations with their local Fire and Rescue Service, including through joint visits to identify risks and familiarise all involved with sites that may be susceptible to wildfire.
- We advise that landowners complete a wildfire checklist (which can be funded through [Countryside Stewardship](#)) . Where high vulnerability is identified it is the landowners' responsibility to consider fire risk assessments and fire response plans¹....

Fire risk monitoring and preparedness

- The NE 'Cross Functional Wildfire Group' discusses wildfire issues as they affect our work. This group includes representatives from across the organisation – from Strategy, CSD (relevant habitat and subject specialists), Communications, Area Teams and NNR Operations.
- We use and currently host the display of the Met Office's [Fire Severity Index \(FSI\)](#)² as an objective measure of how severe a fire could become if one were to start. There are daily ratings for each 10 x 10 km square in England.
- The CROW 2000 Act empowers NE/National Park Authorities and the Forestry Commission to close Open Access land (mountain, moor, heath, down, registered common land, and our own dedicated NNRs) where this is necessary for fire prevention when conditions are rated 'exceptional' on the FSI.
- Closures are legally put in place in a pre-planned way. Closure of open access land does not affect any linear Public Rights of Way, which NE has no powers to close.

Wildfire and National Nature Reserves (NNRs)

- On Natural England-managed NNRs (and other land managed by NE) that have been identified as being at high risk of wildfire, interventions to mitigate the risk are identified in site management plans and implemented in a balanced manner alongside other conservation management measures.
- Emergency Plans are maintained for high-risk sites, and these are shared with the local emergency services. NE has suitable firefighting equipment available at its high-risk sites and staff are trained to use it on our land as directed by the Fire & Rescue Services.
- NNR staff undertake certificated training in wildfire awareness, wildfire risk assessment and wildfire response. Reserve teams managing high risk sites are required to have several staff trained in wildfire response.
- We use our land to test new or innovative techniques in wildfire management.

¹ See an example [Wildfire Management Plan template](#) developed by the Forestry Commission

² The FSI is an assessment of *how severe a fire could become if one were to start*. It is not an assessment of the risk of a fire occurring.

Communication and public engagement/awareness raising

- Natural England believes that wildfire management planning should start by influencing the interaction of people with their environment, changing behaviours to reduce ignitions and empowering local communities to support resilience measures.
- Natural England encourages site owners/managers to adopt proactive measures to help reduce wildfire risk. These include the use of:
 - appropriate, clear and easy to understand signage and educational materials
 - systems to alert communities of visitors using social and other media
 - wardens (including volunteer wardens) to interact with visitors and to act as an early reporting system
 - management of visitors to direct them away from high-risk areas
 - management of high-traffic areas to reduce fire risk
 - use of by-laws to outlaw the lighting of fires and use of barbeques.
- Key behavioural insights help tailor appropriate messages, materials and media to target audiences. Incorporating the positive benefits of responsible recreation for people and nature (rather than just the 'do nots') has been seen to boost effectiveness.
- Public attitudes to fire warning signage and messaging were an area of focus investigated by the Behavioural Insights Team in support of the refresh of the Countryside Code in 2020/21.
- Natural England and Natural Resources Wales (NRW), as co-owners of the Countryside Code, continue to focus on key dates where comms activity would be advantageous, as well as other opportunities to support wider priorities and events (e.g. NNR celebrations, fire safety messaging as part of social media posts/blogs etc.)

In the event of a wildfire incident

- The Cross-Functional Wildfire Group oversees an [escalation protocol](#) to ensure that significant fire incidents on NE's estate, or on land NE has an interest in, are quickly reported to the right people as part of our Emergency Response arrangements.
- Where a wildfire is declared a 'major incident', Natural England staff work alongside Defra group, other government departments, and a range of other stakeholders (including the Fire and Rescue Services) to implement National Emergency Incident procedures.

Health and Safety procedures (NE staff only)

- No staff members should be fighting any fires if the flame length is above 50cm or covers an area of 1m² or larger, this includes smouldering peat fires.
- Staff should focus on precautions to take such as creating fire breaks and reviewing emergency procedures.
- If a wildfire does occur on a SSSI, this should be reported on the [SSSI fire register](#).
- If a fire does occur and staff are asked to assist in "damping down or similar" activities, by local Fire & Rescue Services, then a suitable and sufficient risk assessment must be in place that ensures that any staff members or volunteers involved are not at risk of exposure heat / burns or smoke inhalation.
- For support with this please contact your regional H&S business partner or submit and enquiry via [My H&S](#).

- If a fire does occur and NE staff or volunteers are involved in extinguishing the fire then this must be reported as a near miss on [My H&S](#).
- Please also see the [Health and Safety Policy Supplement](#) for wildfire.

SSSI wildfire incident reporting

- The [wildfire incident register](#) is used to record all known wildfire incidents on SSSIs, including information on location, date, extent and – where known – the cause and impacts the fire has had on the site.
- Having access to accurate data on wildfire incidents on protected sites helps us gather evidence to support research into the causes and management of wildfire risk.

Links to other resources

- Forestry Commission:
 - Practice Guide (2014, under review) [Building Wildfire Resilience into forest management planning](#)
 - [Wildfire Management Plan](#) template (2020)
 - [Wildfire statistics for England: Report to 2020-21](#)
- UK Climate Change Risk Assessment (CCRA 3) [Wildfire Briefing](#) (2021)
- Natural England published evidence / research
 - [Burning evidence review](#) and FCS definitions for [blanket bog](#) and [heathland](#) – for further background and LTT/FAQs, see [intranet article](#).
 - [Wildfire evidence review \(NEER014\)](#)
 - [NECR484 Edition 1 Three Wildfires in England - NECR484](#)
- [England and Wales Wildfire Forum | Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service](#) has links to the current EWWF programme, webinars and case studies.
- Research involving the UK Fire Danger Rating System Group: [Publications – Toward a UK Fire Danger Rating System](#)
- Met Office's Fire Severity Index and Prevention Restrictions under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000): [FSI briefing updated 2025.docx](#)
- Lantra wildfire training courses: [Products - Lantra](#)
- IUCN (Nov 2024) [Wildfire resilience: why rewetting peatlands must play a key role](#)

And....our Sharepoint site for further internal resources/information:

[Natural England Wildfire SharePoint site](#)

Contacts:

[REDACTED], Principal Officer (Uplands) - Strategy
[REDACTED], Senior Wildfire Officer - Strategy