

What is the Landowner's Role?  
- Estate assets at risk are Society's assets at risk

Thank you Chairman for inviting me to speak at your National Wildfire Conference on behalf of Scotland's representative body for Landowners, Scottish Land & Estates and allowing me the chance to look over the Scottish Fire & Rescue Service's awe inspiring new training centre in Cambuslang. I passed by the Fire College at Gullane many times but these facilities are, I understand, of world class standard and it is to the credit of the SFRS that they have had the vision to push forward with it. I understand that our organisation is arranging for our members to visit in the near future and I hope to be able to join them.

I have been asked to try, in a half hour or so, to describe the Landowner's role in the prevention of wildfire. For today's purposes I will expand the term landowner to include the wider group of land managers including the farmer's crofters, foresters, gamekeepers, and rangers who live work and look after much of rural Scotland.

First, what threat do wildfires create to life, property, and more general environmental economic and social assets in rural areas. The answer is that with our recent experience of multiple landscape scale wildfires, for example in 2013, is that both the threat and the damage are increasing. This includes damage to estate and utility company's infrastructure, forestry, grouse moors, grazing land and conservation sites. The threat is to the public and firefighters involved. Wildfire is nobody's friend.

This means that land managers need to check their risk assessments and perhaps implement more robust mitigation measures. As wildfires do not respect boundaries, and often require substantial resources to put them out, the obvious response is to work in partnership, with neighbours, the fire service and agencies to reduce the threat of damage and share the burden.

Scottish Land and Estates is therefore working with its members and partners locally, regionally and nationally to minimise the impact of wildfire and help us all prepare for and respond to outbreaks as they inevitably, from time to time, occur.

Landowners and land managers have been working in partnership with the SFRS and it's predecessor regional fire services for many years. For example the North Grampian Forest Fire Protection Group has been in existence now for over 30 years.

So when the first really bad fire season occurred in 2003. This collaboration at a regional level really helped the establishment of the Scottish Wildfire Forum in 2004 at a national level. This local and national structure should, I trust, give you some appreciation of the active, collaborative approach taken by private sector landowners in Scotland to better understand and exercise some control over wildfire.

Looking at fire management from a different perspective, there is a long established traditional land management practice in Scotland, as in many other parts of the world, to deliberately burn areas of heath and rank grassland to encourage new growth, called Muirburn.

Muirburn, has been a regulated activity in Scotland for centuries. Indeed the earliest legislation to regulate muirburn, the traditional term for prescribed burning, was by an Act of the Scottish Parliament in 1424. Also the common phrase “as fast as a wildfire” has its equivalent in the Scots dialect of “which spread like a moor burne”. And the first recorded use of this term was in 1716!

Now our Muirburn legislation is primarily based on the 1946 Hill Farming Act as modified by the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act of 2011 and Climate Change Act of 2009. This is supported by the Code of Practice known as the Muirburn Code (2011), that is likely to be reviewed soon. Muirburn is normally carried out under moderate conditions with few problems but as is covered in the Muirburn Code, estates should have sufficient resources on-site and as back-up to put out the fires they light.

They say that the best training is doing an activity that is most similar to the task and skills you are aiming for. When a fire occurs on a landscape, it interacts with the vegetation, the weather and the terrain. These are things that land managers work with on a daily basis. How many times have you heard a farmer complain about the weather? A deer stalker is constantly monitoring the wind as he approaches a stag. A forester won't plant his trees if the ground is too dry. These are all examples that show how rural people in their day-to-day work are deeply connected with the natural environment, they are absorbing and interpreting information about the condition of the vegetation, the fuels, the whole time. Some Land managers who carry out Muirburn develop even deeper and more specific fire management skills, that can be really useful when tackling Wildfires.

We understand that in some parts of the UK joint exercises and training between FRS and land managers at prescribed fires is occurring, we think this initiative should be developed further.

Land managers usually have good off-road driving skills and because they depend on their vehicles and other machinery keep the maintenance up. Estates also use a number of specialised All-Terrain Vehicles or ATVs to help traverse really remote and rugged areas that don't even have tracks. The Estates 4WD vehicles and ATVs can be put to use in transporting staff and equipment when dealing with wildfires.

Most estates carrying out Muirburn have also invested in the very effective fire fogging pumps, that can quickly be put on to the ATVs and transported to where they are needed.

Mobile phones often don't work in rural areas, so estates have bought VHF radios and because they frequently work with their neighbours on other tasks they all share common radio frequencies.

All these activities support the development of wildfire related resources and skills. However Scottish Land and Estates is doing more. We have been working with the Scottish Government, the Scottish Qualifications Authority and a new organisation called Rural Skills Scotland to develop a Modern Apprenticeship framework for estate maintenance, which includes the Lantra module on "Basic Forest and Moorland Firefighting".

In some areas Wildfire groups have been created by neighbouring estates to share, co-ordinate and concentrate resources strategically to deal with incidents. And currently more work is being carried out to help create and expand the network of fire groups and contingency planning functions by encouraging the involvement of existing organisations such as Deer and Moorland management groups in areas identified as having particularly high risk of wildfire.

This co-ordination has two primary objectives, firstly reducing damage and loss and secondly providing better points of contact with the fire and rescue services attending and managing incidents.

Wildfire Groups therefore provide an immediate local response to the threat of wildfire and establish a local partnership between the FRS and local estates. Wildfire Groups should also include other public agencies with interests in the subject including: resilience, forestry, water, and environment authorities together with local farmers, gamekeepers and stalkers.

The aim is that wildfire groups will establish common communications and regularly update contacts, distribute fire danger warnings, co-ordinate training and Health & Safety advice, increase public awareness and offer a structure that fits well with the SFRS practice and policy.

The wildfire groups will promote the use of common Fire Action Plans and Fire Maps, which will be developed and shared with partners, using standard symbols, and procedures. Indeed the South Grampian Wildfire Group has also developed a good practice guide. Groups will also be able to grow local knowledge: of estate boundaries, water resources, access routes, fuel types and loads and could perhaps be a route to encourage joint training exercises with the FRS.

Estates prepare for each wildfire season by organising and paying Fire Insurance, covering fire-fighting costs such as the use of helicopters, equipment is checked and maintained, and contact sheets updated. During high hazard periods estates minimise activities that might create incidents. They inform the public taking access of the dangers inherent in campfires, BBQs and cigarettes; and put out "Fire Danger" signs and media releases. When fire danger is extreme weekend staff rotas are agreed and estate staff often patrol known "hot spot"

areas and extinguish small fires that do not even get reported to the fire service. Estates also keep an eye out for their neighbours. Not all estates have resident staff so contacts and procedures become even more important in these circumstances.

A couple of examples. In 2012 estate neighbours of the Birse Community Trust, spotted a fire that threatened the community woods. The South Grampian Wildfire Group deployed resources alongside the fire service, put the fire out, then took rota watches through the night and carried on with mop-up the next day. The fire group liaison manager finally managed to contact a trustee the following morning. This was all covered by procedures agreed in advance. Another example, in 2014 the Chairman of the National Trust for Scotland thanked neighbouring estates and their staff for extensive help extinguishing a difficult fire on their Mar Lodge Estate, a premium conservation site, that smouldered for a week. Wildfires can rapidly consume immense resources, people, equipment and especially helicopters cost a lot of money. One wildfire alone in 2003 cost Highlands and Islands Fire Authority £1.5M to extinguish.

Now the budget constraints on the fire service, both on annual budgets and the removal of local authority reserves, are strategically important issues. It would therefore seem logical that local, estate based resources will become even more important as a reserve. As an example of what that reserve might consist of please see the resources summary for the South Grampian Wildfire Group. The private sector knows that it will have to carry more of the wildfire burden. Our assets are at risk, and we know we need to protect them. However there are still significant issues to tackle. There are two key wildfire fighting resources largely owned and managed by the private sector, these are the ATV mounted fire fogging units and helicopters.

We need better systems to speed up deployment of these crucial resources and better communication with FRS at incidents to ensure safe and speedy fire suppression. We estimate that there may be some 200+ ATV mounted fire fogging units in the private sector in Scotland but we don't have the systems to deploy them quickly. There are also gaps in the geographic spread of these resources that need to be identified and filled. We will work with the SFRS to develop an appropriate asset register and call-out system. In addition to our tactical role on the ground, it is important that we all recognise the strategic role played by estates in helping establish the Scottish Wildfire Forum, arguably the reason we are all here today in Cambuslang discussing and debating the issue of wildfires.

As mentioned before, the Scottish Wildfire Forum was set up in 2004 after a particularly bad series of wildfires the previous year in the Highlands of Scotland. Over the last 11 years the forum has successfully brought together researchers, practitioners, public and private partners together to carry out groundbreaking research, consider best practice, develop common practices, advise on prevention strategies and inform national policy. A major achievement of the momentum created was the publication in 2013 of the Operational Guidance on Wildfire by the Scottish Government.



Scottish Land & Estates will continue to be a key stakeholder on the Scottish Wildfire Forum. We consider this to be part of our responsibility as landowners working for the countryside in Scotland and we proud to be partners with the Scottish Fire & Rescue Service in this regard. *Thank You.*