

Ministear airson Slàinte Coimhearsnachd agus Cùisean Lagha
Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs
Paul Wheelhouse BPA/MSP

F/T: 0300 244 4000
E: scottish.ministers@gov.scot



Delegate
UK Wildfire Conference 2015



10 November 2015

Dear Delegate

I would like to express my own sincere disappointment at not being able to be with you this morning. I was very much looking forward to meeting and speaking with some of you, and hearing about your experiences of dealing with wildfires. It was therefore a great regret that, due to the need to fulfil unanticipated parliamentary business, with an appearance at Justice Committee, I am required to miss today's conference. Please accept my most sincere apologies.

As Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs, my portfolio includes Ministerial responsibility for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS). However, before taking up my new position a year ago, I served as the Minister for Environment and Climate Change. That means that I am not only aware of the dangers faced by firefighters in tackling wildfires, which have increased in frequency and may become even more of a challenge as a consequence of climate change, but I am also well aware of the significant environmental impact wildfire can have on our wildlife and natural environment. I know such wildfires potentially cause the loss of pristine and rare habitats, as well as the have potential for significant economic and social costs to any affected local communities and land owners and, of course, while posing significant risks to our brave firefighters.

The fact that you are all at the Conference today underlines the seriousness of this issue, and as such we can no longer be purely reactionary in dealing with it. We must pool our resources and work together to improve resilience and reduce the number of preventable wildfires.

One of the benefits of the reform of Scotland's Fire and Rescue Service is that all parts of Scotland now have access to specialist equipment and expertise whenever and wherever it is needed. The creation of a single service has removed the historical geographical borders that existed between the eight legacy fire and rescue services. This makes resources more readily available to tackle wildfire incidents wherever they occur.

Taigh Naomh Anndrais, Rathad Regent, Dùn Èideann EH1 3DG
St Andrew's House, Regent Road, Edinburgh EH1 3DG
www.gov.scot



The Scottish Government commissioned the UK's only Wildfire Operational Guidance Manual which was launched at the Wildfire Conference 2013 held in Wales. This vital resource is used to train firefighters in the safe and effective handling of wildfires. The SFRS has also committed significant resources to training a number of senior officers to an advanced level to ensure that experts are available to attend and control wildfire incidents throughout the country.

During 2012/13 there was a significant increase in wildfires across Scotland and, as a direct result of this activity, the SFRS sought to make immediate improvements starting with re-energising the Scottish Wildfire Forum (SWF). This was followed by the launch of a sustained prevention campaign to make people aware of how easily a wildfire can be started and the consequences it can have on the local environment and communities.

Since its rejuvenation the Scottish Wildfire Forum has focused its efforts on enhancing partnership working between the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and those with a vested interest in land management throughout Scotland. The results of this work speak for themselves and are reflected in the fact that the Forum has been shortlisted for the Excellence in Fire & Emergency Awards 2015.

Over the next couple of days, you will be hearing and learning from colleagues and experts from as far afield as California, New Zealand and the Mediterranean, as well as from those closer to home. They will speak about the challenges they have faced in their own countries and discuss the techniques and approaches which have proven to be successful, as well as those that were less so. This is highly important as lessons learned from our failures can often be even more valuable than those learned from our successes.

My fellow Ministers and I are keen to work with resilience partners, academia, third sector and voluntary organisations to continue building Scotland's resilience capabilities, particularly in relation to natural hazards, such as wildfire, and to further Scotland's reputation as a world leader in resilience planning. To this end in August 2014 I announced, as the then Minister for Environment and Climate Change, the Scottish Government's intention to launch a National Centre for Resilience (NCR) which will provide a unique multi-disciplinary platform for knowledge exchange and, through partners including the SFRS, will provide access to a wealth of expertise and resources.

My colleague Dr Aileen McLeod, as my successor as Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, is ensuring that the centre moves from concept to implementation and we are both very pleased with the current progress. In the wider context, I believe that this provides an exciting opportunity to show the world what we are doing here in Scotland, and develop into a Centre of Excellence that others can learn from.

I would also like to take this opportunity to inform you that the Scottish Government intends to commission a review of the Muirburn Code, which was last updated in August 2011, to ensure that it continues to be effective in promoting well-managed and responsible burning practices. To achieve this, it is vital that we work together to ensure that the Code contains clear guidelines for safe burning which are relevant to the full range of practitioners.

I would like to congratulate you all on the drive and determination with which you embrace this challenge and encourage you to make the most of this opportunity to develop and strengthen the relationships needed to tackle this issue.

It only remains for me to express my hope that you all have a very successful conference.

Kindest regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Wheelhouse', written in a cursive style.

Paul Wheelhouse MSP