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Food & Rural Affairs



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The Heather and Grass Burning Code 2007

Best Practice Guide 6: Agricultural burning of heathland and grassland



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Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Nobel House
17 Smith Square
London
SW1P 3JR
www.defra.gov.uk

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Agricultural burning of heathland and grassland

Purpose of the Guide

1. The Heather and Grass Burning Regulations were updated in 2007. The Regulations were supported by an updated Heather and Grass Burning Code (the Code) that was launched at the same time and describes the best way to carry out burning safely and in ways that can benefit the environment.
2. This Best Practice Guide is a supplement to the Code and provides additional information that is relevant to farmers.



Reasons for Burning Heathland and Grassland

3. Moorland burning is not just carried out for grouse: there can also be real benefits for livestock farmers. Well managed moorland contains a variety of vegetation, such as heather and other dwarf shrubs, cottongrass and various other moorland grasses, with different heights, structure and growing seasons. This vegetation mix can provide feed for some stock throughout the year.
4. Cottongrass provides an early source of food and benefits sheep and moorland birds alike. This plant grows on wetter areas and is very prominent after a fire, before the other plant species have regenerated.
5. Heather can benefit from grazing and if heather is grazed at a sustainable level it will not need burning as often. Extra care will be needed in winter to prevent overgrazing and poaching, and it is important that winter grazing only removes a small proportion of the annual heather growth. No more than about 20% of the annual growth should be removed in total to be certain that the heather will not be overgrazed.

Things to Avoid

6. Burning small isolated areas in the presence of grazing livestock can lead to the regenerating areas acting as a honeypot for stock. The stock graze the emerging vegetation in preference to other areas and the result is that the area of the fire can lose its dwarf shrubs and become dominated by coarse grasses. This is a particular problem in wetter areas.
7. Burning areas with purple moor-grass in the sward frequently (i.e. every few years), can lead to a loss of heather, other dwarf shrub species and bog-mosses. The grass thrives on the release of the potash from the fire, but other species cannot easily survive this regime. Purple moor-grass is of little interest to sheep after the end of June and although cattle will graze it for longer, it is not very nutritious. A mix of vegetation will be more nutritious.
8. Large fires should be avoided. See paragraph 14 below.
9. Do not light fires without adequate resources to control them. For example, the practice of lighting fires with a long fire front would be in breach of the Regulations. The guidance in paragraphs 15 and 19 of the Code should be followed.

Good practice

10. Fires should be planned so that stock do not concentrate in the burnt areas. Burning should take place in different parts of the moor as this will help to spread the grazing and reduce the pressure on individual areas. Where possible fires should be linked to previous fires, or other breaks in vegetation cover, to allow stock to move into the burnt areas. Sheep may not find isolated burnt areas in thick vegetation and therefore these areas will not contribute to spreading the grazing pressure.
11. Fires must be controlled to make sure that only the target area is burnt and that it does not get too big.

12. Burning is a frequently practised method of managing moorland. However, where burning cannot be carried out safely, or where it may cause damage to the land, farmers may have appropriate machinery that can be used to cut the vegetation instead.

Sizes of Fires

13. On heathland, the Code recommends that fires should be no larger than 2 ha (see paragraph 21 of the Code), but the maximum size increases to 5 ha when burning grass. This is because, large fires are more difficult to control and they do not provide the diversity of vegetation in an area that smaller fires produce.

14. Traditionally, fire sizes on the moors in the south west of England have been larger. Separate guidance for these moors has been produced to reflect this practice and this is available from the Natural England website¹. It should be noted that the Regulations state that burning fires larger than 10 ha cannot take place except under licence.

Burning Plans

15. Paragraph 7 of the Code advocates the production of a written burning plan. Separate guidance is available on how to produce these on the Natural England website¹.

16. Completion of this Plan will provide you with further guidance about how to prepare for the burning season. The Plan will formalise the preparation process and it has been produced with the input of people who have long experience of burning.

Summary

17. Burning of heathland and grassland is a traditional practice that if carried out to the standards set out in the Heather and Grass Burning Code and the supplementary guidance, has benefits for farmers, and their livestock. Burning can also provide benefit for certain species of birds, animals and plants.

18. However, there are some species and other features, such as peat soils or areas with soil erosion, that are sensitive to burning and may be damaged if burning is not carried out properly. These areas have been identified as 'sensitive areas' in the Code and it is important that special care is taken where these species and features are present.

19. The Code provides details of the preparations required and the techniques that should be used for burning.

20. Many farmers have much experience of good burning practice, but if there is uncertainty about how the code or this guidance can be applied by farmers, the local Natural England staff should be consulted in advance of burning taking place.

1. <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/regulation/burning/default.aspx>

Further information

21. Information on burning, including electronic copies of the Regulations, the Code, and a range of best practice guides are available on Natural England's website at <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/regulation/burning/default.aspx>.
22. The website also gives contact details for Natural England's regional offices, if it would help to discuss burning proposals.



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