

The burning question in the Cairngorms National Park

Description

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LAND managers who carry out muirburn are being encouraged by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to complete a new course that aims to uphold the highest of standards of the practice to protect the environment.

Muirburn is the intentional and controlled burning of vegetation, commonly heather, to promote new growth and is mainly associated with managing land for grouse shooting, deer management or for sheep farming.

The training, which has been developed by a multi-agency group, will assist practitioners to adhere to best practice guidance and follow the Muirburn Code during muirburn season, which takes place between October 1 and April 15.

The fire service has joined forces with the Scottish Gamekeepers Association, Scotland's Regional Moorland Groups and NatureScot to shape the lessons.

Bruce Farquharson, SFRS deputy assistant chief officer, and chair of the Scottish Wildfire Forum, said: "The course has been designed to enhance the planning, skills and



THE BURNING QUESTION: the practice is controversial, but land managers now have the very latest advice available on good practice.

experience needed, to practice muirburn. We want to ensure that prescribed burning is done to a high standard, ensuring that practitioners avoid damaging habitats, wildlife and the wider environment.

"We are pleased to have played a part in developing the lessons, as

part of this multi-agency group, to support land managers to work in a safe and responsible manner."

The new course includes e-learning, as well as a practical session. Participants will learn about the equipment and techniques used to safely apply fire as a land

management tool, as well as how to carry out the appropriate weather and wildfire danger assessments needed for a successful muirburn.

Karen Rentoul, NatureScot's policy and advice manager for uplands and peatlands, said: "Muirburn can be an important and useful land management tool that can provide multiple benefits, but it's vital it's carried out appropriately to keep fires under control and prevent damage.

Iain Hepburn of The Scottish Gamekeepers Association, said: "The group's remit was to come up with a training package that was fit for purpose.

"It had to be user friendly, easily understood by the people who would use it, not be bogged down in technicalities, but have enough new material that all practitioners would realise that the days of bad practice are finished."

Calum Kippen of Scotland's Regional Moorland Groups said: "As practitioners who use muirburn - a vital management tool for biodiversity, conservation and wildfire mitigation - we recognise the importance of ensuring all land managers uphold the highest of standards."

Article from the Strathy 19th January 2023

The Scottish Gamekeepers Association has long argued ([see here](#)) that muirburn helps prevent devastating wildfires when the truth is that it is muirburn that has devastated nature across large swathes of Scotland. The fact that Fire and Rescue Scotland has chosen to invest resources in teaching gamekeepers how to "safely apply fire" suggests that they know that muirburn often gets out of control, spreading the devastation caused by burning further.

While from a narrow Fire and Rescue perspective it may be quite rational to devote scarce public resources to educating gamekeepers, the amount of resources that our public authorities devote to supporting muirburn by landowners, among whom are some of the richest people in the world, is significant. Besides Fire and Rescue Scotland both NatureScot and the Cairngorms National Park Authority, through the East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership, have been trying to improve muirburn practice in the National Park. As an indication of the value of this public subsidy, the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust offer a muirburn advisory services that charges £820 plus VAT for a risk mapping report or £598 + VAT for a half-day of more general advice ([see here](#)).

The draft Cairngorms National Park Partnership Plan (NPPP) included a section on muirburn which included a commitment to produce wildfire action plans across the area by 2024 and to agree a policy on “prescription burning”:



**TARGET /
INDICATOR**

No muirburn on peatland soils of over 50 cm depth and burning on shallower peats regulated by licensing by 2023.

Wildfire action plans cover the whole National Park by 2024.

**Why are we proposing
this objective?**

Fires on deep peat can damage the peatland’s ability to store carbon and very intensive burning regimes on shallower peat soils reduce habitat diversity. Any muirburn in the National Park must be done in line with best practice.

Wildfires release carbon, can damage or destroy sensitive and rare habitats, can kill species and pose a significant risk to people and property. We will look to have clear wildfire action plans in place by 2024 and agree a position on the role of prescription burning as part of these.

The plan ([see here](#)) finally approved by the Minister for National Parks, the Green MSP Lorna Slater, was significantly different with muirburn and wildfires grouped under a new heading “fire management”:

A7. Fire management

Muirburn is used as a management tool in the Cairngorms to improve grazing, to increase grouse densities, to create firebreaks and to create seed bed conditions for tree regeneration. It is a potentially dangerous tool which should only be carried out by skilled, trained practitioners, operating in line with best practice and with the new licencing regime when this is in place. It should not be used on deep peat.

The management of wildfires is separate from muirburn. Wildfires release carbon, can damage or destroy sensitive and rare habitats, can kill species and pose a significant risk to people and property.

There is a need to have a robust approach to fire in the National Park and to ensure we have the resources to deliver on the ground. The changing climate heightens the risk of wildfire across the National Park and we need to respond accordingly.



OBJECTIVE

Ensure that all managed burning (muirburn) follows best practice as defined by the muirburn licencing scheme, supporting habitat restoration and recovery.



TARGET

- Reduce wildfire risk by developing an integrated wildfire management plan for the National Park.



INDICATOR

- All muirburn will comply with regulations set out in the muirburn licencing scheme, including stopping burning on deep peatlands as defined by the licencing regime.



ACTIONS BY 2027

- Conduct an audit to establish an accurate baseline for the extent of deep peat in the National Park.
- Introduce and support a muirburn licencing regime in the National Park.
- Develop an integrated wildfire management plan for the National Park, including strategic firebreaks.
- Develop and agree a National Park approach on campfires and barbecues.

Instead of muirburn being described as a damaging practice which releases carbon into the atmosphere and destroys biodiversity, all for the sake of producing large numbers of red grouse for shooters, it has been sanitised and become a “management tool”. Wildfires are treated something quite different to muirburn despite the fact that muirburn has been responsible for devastating “wildfires” ([see here](#)).

Indeed, although the way the policy is worded suggests muirburn is different from wildfires, everything that is said about the damaging consequences of wildfires (release of carbon, damage to habitats, killing animals and damaging property) applies to muirburn. Moreover, if the changing climate

“heightens the risks of wildfires”, it also increases the risks associated with muirburn getting out of control. Hence perhaps the training by Fire and Rescue Scotland.

The commitment in the draft NPPP to end all burning on peat over 50cms thick has completely disappeared, as has the commitment to control burning on shallower peaty soils through grouse moor licensing by this year. Instead, 2027 is the new target for saying something about burning on peat, a delay of four years. This is not entirely the fault of the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA), which appears completely under the control of central government that endlessly talks about the climate and nature emergencies but keeps delaying any reform that might make force landowners to make a difference.

This change in policy position by the CNPA allows it to justify forking out large sums of public money for peatland restoration, while doing nothing to prevent “sporting” landowners such as King Charles ([see here](#)) continuing to burn the land round about. A further waste of public funds.

What this demonstrates is the power of sporting landowners to subvert public policy and manipulate public authorities to act in their interests rather than the public interest. It should act as a warning to all those organisations who still hope that the Scottish Government’s proposals for grouse moor licensing will change anything ([see here](#)). What is needed is a complete ban on muirburn, starting in Scotland’s National Parks.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. grouse moors
3. Minister Environment
4. muirburn
5. NatureScot
6. Scottish Government

Date Created

January 19, 2023

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