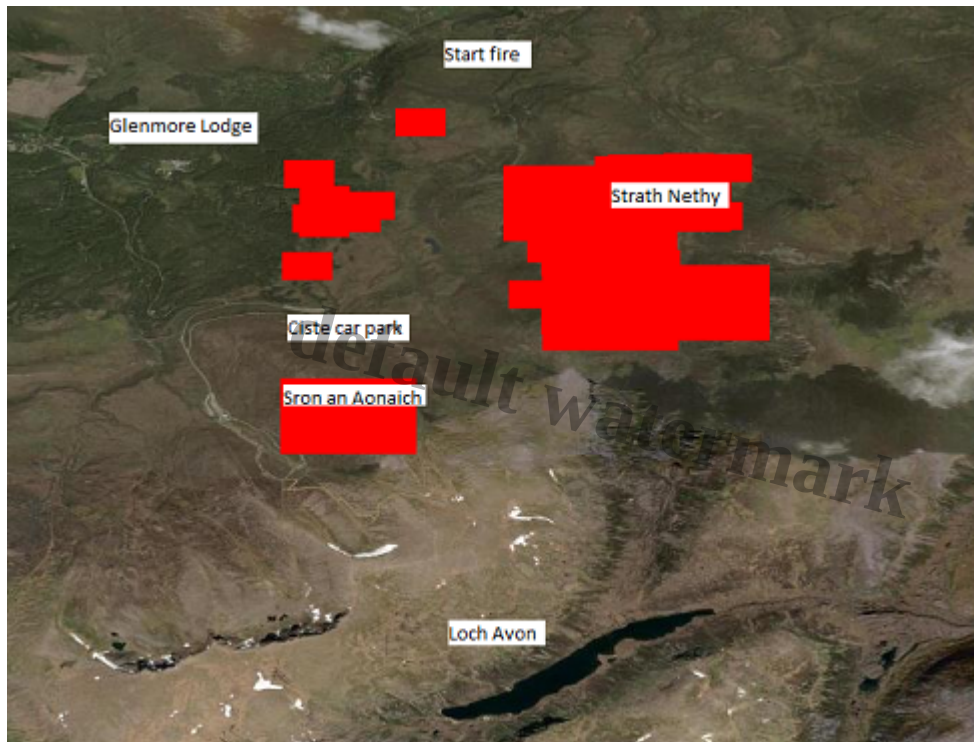


Learning from the ‘Glenmore’ wildfire in the Cairngorms National Park needs to start now

Description



Areas that have been burning in last 24 hours as recorded on NASA’s FIRN data base at 08.06 18th July. NB data takes time to load to the database so this does not show current position and some of the isolated red patches may be fire breaks

While efforts to contain the Glen More wildfire continue ([see here](#)) and have had some impact, it now appears likely only rain will extinguish it. In the last year the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) has approved fire byelaws, intended to reduce the likelihood of wildfires happening, and what was described as a ‘pioneering’ Integrated Fire Management Plan (IFMP) ([see here](#)) intended to improve the response to wildfires in the National Park.

This post argues the wildfire shows neither have worked and highlights some issues that need to be considered now, before the evidence disappears. It is not intended in any way to detract from the efforts that people on the ground have made to prevent wildfires or to fight this fire.

The cause of the fire and the CNPA’s fire byelaws



Ryvoan Bothy with the wildfire in the background. Picture credit: Geoff Martin and the Badenoch and Strathspey Herald.

When the BBC ([see here](#)) and others started reporting a wildfire AT Ryvoan bothy, I immediately thought someone staying must have started the fire and started fearing the potential repercussions. In fact, as this photo and a video clip published by the BBC ([see here](#)) showed, the fire started almost a kilometre away by the track over to Strath Nethy.



The view from the summit of Meall a Bhuachaille by a hiker named Chris. Ryvoan bothy is near the track through to Abernethy in the bottom left hand corner.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) were notified about the fire at 11.47 in the morning of Wednesday 15th July. The time and location suggest it is unlikely this wildfire was caused by either a campfire or a barbecue, both of which have been banned this year under the Cairngorms National Park's Authority (CNPA)'s fire byelaws.

However, stranger things have happened than people lighting fires in out of the way places in the sweltering heat. With the CNPA's announcement at the start of July ([see here](#)) that they were stepping up joint patrols with Police Scotland, including late at night, to enforce the fire byelaws it is possible that someone came out to Strath Nethy to light a fire or barbecue without being caught.

Whether that is the case or not needs to be investigated but points to the fundamental flaw in the fire byelaws. As the IFMP stated, *'if the (fire) byelaw is approved then the Park Authority must ensure there is adequate resource, including training, to make its use effective'*. The fire byelaws apply to the whole of the National Park for the period from 1st April to 30th September. That was always going to be far too big an area and far too long a period of time to police effectively whatever the propaganda about stepping up patrols. The CNPA should have learned from the amount of resources have been

devoted, unsuccessfully, to trying to stop people from camping along the loch shores in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park (a tiny area by comparison).

As importantly, to the extent that the CNPA does police the byelaws effectively, all that will happen is they displace fires and barbecues elsewhere. That is exactly what happened with the camping byelaws in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park: Glen Etive, without any facilities, became a midden.

Such displacement adds to wildfire risks because, as we are seeing with the current wildfire, responding to them in remote places like Strath Nethy is far more difficult than doing so by the road in places like Glen Moreâ!â!â!.



SFRS pumping water out of Loch Morlich on day three of the fire â easy! The challenge is transporting the water to put out fires in remote places. Photo credit SFRS

â!â!...but I digress

5.6 Causes of primary fires

Table 6 – causes of primary fires

Cause	Number of fires	Percent of tot
Heat source and combustibles brought together	16	30%
<u>Intentional burn, out of control (muirburn, woodland etc – breakdown of type not available)</u>	10	19%
Overheating, unknown cause	4	8%
Accumulation of flammable material	2	4%
Bonfire out of control	2	4%
Careless handling – careless disposal	2	4%
Natural occurrence	2	4%
Negligent use of equipment	1	2%
Other (suspected causes below)	14	
Campfires	7	13%
Discarded cigarette	1	2%
Fallen tree breaking electricity cables	1	2%
Spark from train	1	2%
Not known	4	8%

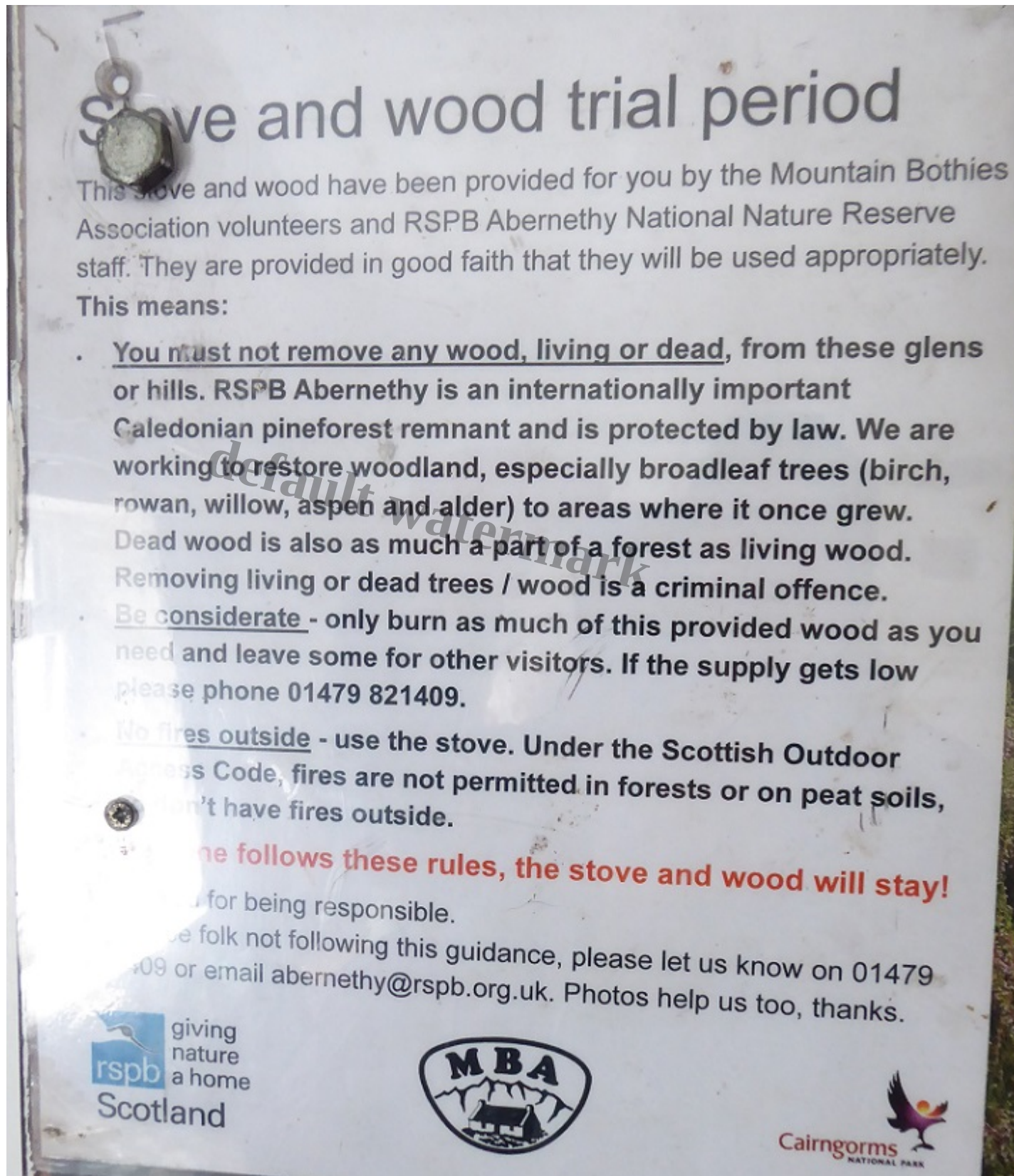
* Does not total 100% due to rounding

Primary fires are those attended by SFRS which are recorded as having a significant impact. Data from Appendix 1 on outdoor fire incidents 2010-23 in the Cairngorms National Park.

Muirburn, a more common cause of wildfires in the National Park than campfires, can safely be ruled out as causing this wildfire since it started on the the RSPB's Abernethy estate and the RSPB don't do muirburn.

The proximity of the start of the wildfire to the track, however, does suggest its cause was not natural and was in some way people-related, a cigarette possibly or an empty drinks bottle flung into the heather.

The point is that if we are to learn from this fire, the authorities need to establish the cause. The last thing we need in response to this wildfire is more ill-informed debate or calls for immediate action that results, for example, an extension of the CNPA's byelaws to fires in bothies.



Notice at Ryvoan bothy 2024. The way fire risk has been managed at Ryvoan is to the credit of both local RSPB staff who supplied wood to the bothy so people could use the stove without chopping, regenerating woodland and the MBA. Why couldn't Forest and Land Scotland do that at Loch Morlich?

Some media reports altered what was stated in SFRS's news release ([see here](#)), from the fire starting NEAR Ryvoan bothy - the best known landmark in the area - to reporting that the fire had started AT Ryvoan bothy. Such misinformation has already set hares running on social media.

All that is certain at this stage is that the CNPA's fire byelaws, which were heralded as a means of mitigating fire risk ([see here](#)), haven't prevented what has turned into the largest and most significant wildfire within the National Park since it was created. That deserves public consideration.

Will SFRS report on the cause of this wildfire unlike Dava Moor?

Unfortunately, since their provision of information on the causes of wildfires to the CNPA in 2024, the SFRS appears to have deliberately stopped keeping information on the cause of wildfires. A case in point are the two fires on Dava Moor which took place last year and were billed as Scotland's first ever mega fire. Eyewitness reports at the time suggested the cause of the first fire, which started within the boundary of the Cairngorms National Park, was a flare. Despite the BBC reporting in July 2025 that the SFRS and Police Scotland had initiated an investigation into the causes of the fire ([see here](#)), nothing was reported publicly. It has then taken a number of FOI responses, first reported in the Scotsman ([see here](#)), for SFRS to admit - with lots of caveats - that the first fire was caused by a flare thrown from a helicopter.

I had not seen any information about the causes of the second fire, which started in the vicinity of Loch Allan on Saturday 28th June and which the BBC also reported was being investigated ([see here](#)), so I submitted an FOI response to SFRS. They replied on 22nd October 2025 ([see here](#)) and I have not written about that until now. Their response states:

"Fire investigation did not attend this incident, therefore the IRS [Incident Reporting System] is the only information held. The SFRS hold not additional information".

It does seem extraordinary that Fire investigation was not asked to try and establish one of the two causes of the first mega fire in Scotland. The incident report itself ([see here](#)) described the likely cause of the fire as accidental and lacks any useful information:

Other Details

Multiple seats:	No
Time between ignition and discovery:	Not known
Time between discovery and call:	Not known
How the fire was discovered:	Person
Cause/motive:	Accidental
Estimated fire damage (sq. m.):	12
Fire in area designated as national park:	No
Were hazardous materials involved:	No

The estimate of fire damage recorded on the IRS, 12 square metres, appears ridiculous although the notes at the end of the IRS do qualify this:

Notes

Information Type	Note
Summary	This fire became much larger This was then broken into diff to strong wind. The size of the incident groun early stage of incident before

If the SFRS had time to record the fire when it was only 12 square metres in extent, it begs the question why they were not able to put it out. I prefer to believe that the 12 square metres recorded on the IRS is nonsense and that by the time SFRS crews reached the fire it was totally out of control.

Whatever the explanation for the absence of information, it is quite clear that the SFRS is failing to record the causes of fires. Th leaders of fire fighting teams always used to take notes and I am fairly certain they will have a good idea of what started the fire: the issue appears to be that SFRSâ?? management do not want this information to be recorded on the IRS and as long as they remain in private hands they lie outwith the scope of Freedom of Information requests.

The likely explanation for this secrecy is SFRSâ?? management wish to avoid being dragged into potential insurance claims and all the expense that involves. Scotlandâ??s natural environment should be worth far more than that.

The Cabinet Secretary now responsible for SFRS, the justice secretary Neil Gray, whom the media has reported has been meeting their senior management about this wildfire, should insist that they now start investigating and recording the cause or potential causes of all wildfires starting with this one.

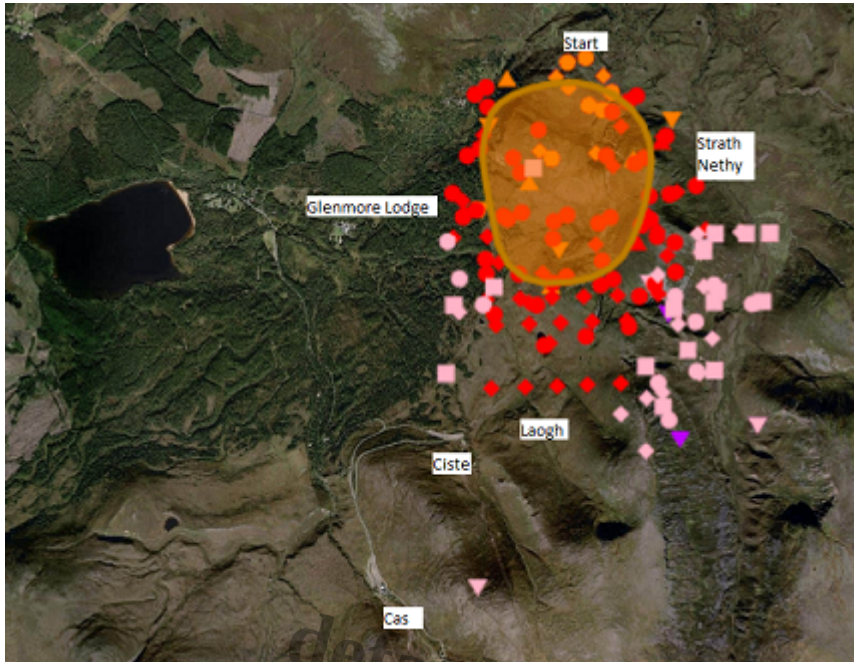
Mr Gray might also usefully ask the following question.

Could this wildfire have been contained?



The wildfire, viewed from the ski road, crosses over the Strath Nethy into Coire an Laogh on Cairn O Strathspey Facebook page

The evidence from photos and satellite data provided by NASA FIRNS and EFFIS (the European Fire Information system) suggests that the front of the fire expanded significantly once it had crossed over from Strath Nethy into the Glen More catchment.

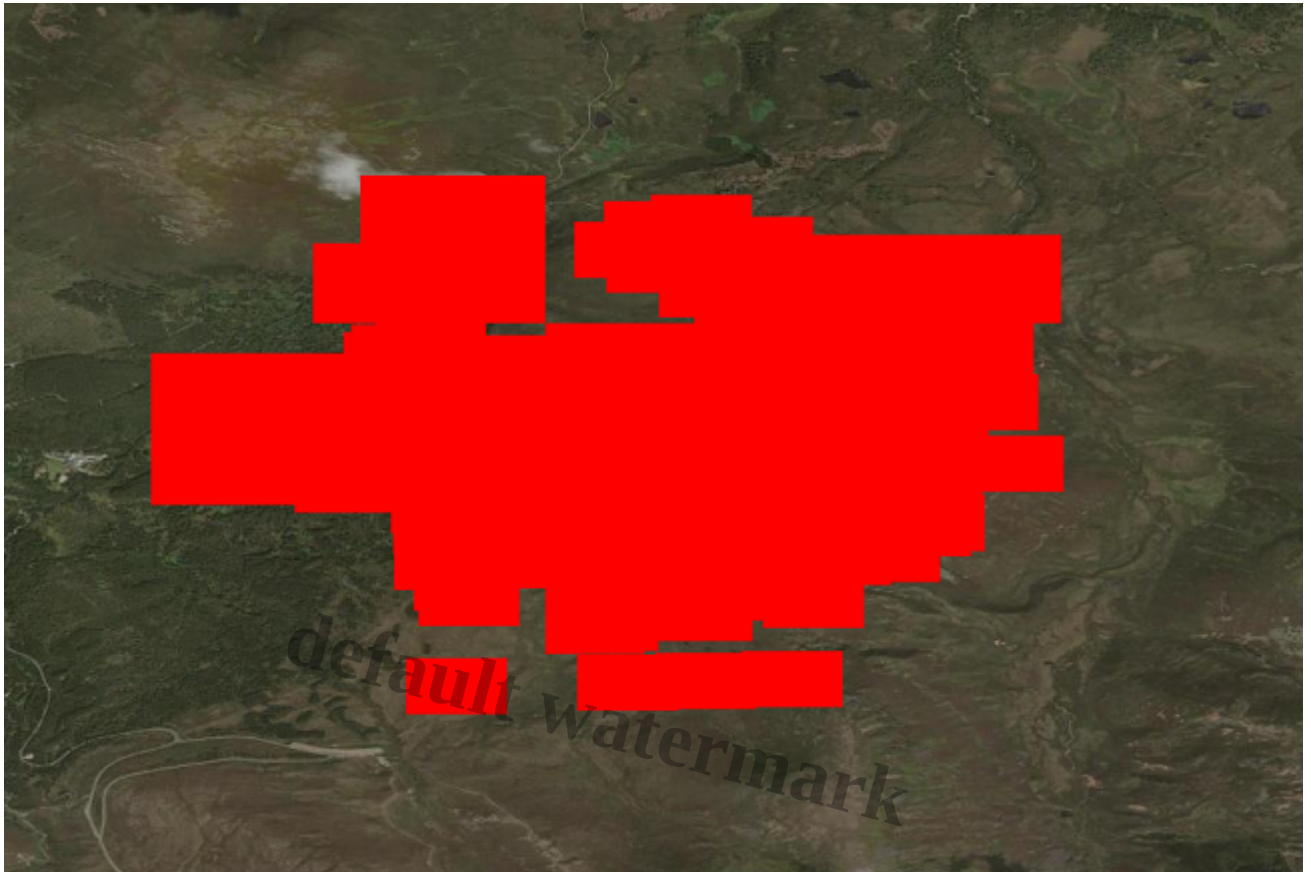


Data from EFFIS. The orange shows the area affected on Wednesday, the red on Thursday and the pink and purple on Friday

It appears the wildfire primarily burned through moorland at first – heather dries out very rapidly in a hot spell – but by Thursday it appears to have spread down into the main Caledonian pine forest in Glen More and by Friday (back) down into Strath Nethy. These developments made it much harder, if not impossible, to extinguish this wildfire. Forest fires are more dangerous and difficult to control while getting people and fire fighting equipment into very remote and trackless areas like the upper parts of Strath Nethy poses enormous challenges.

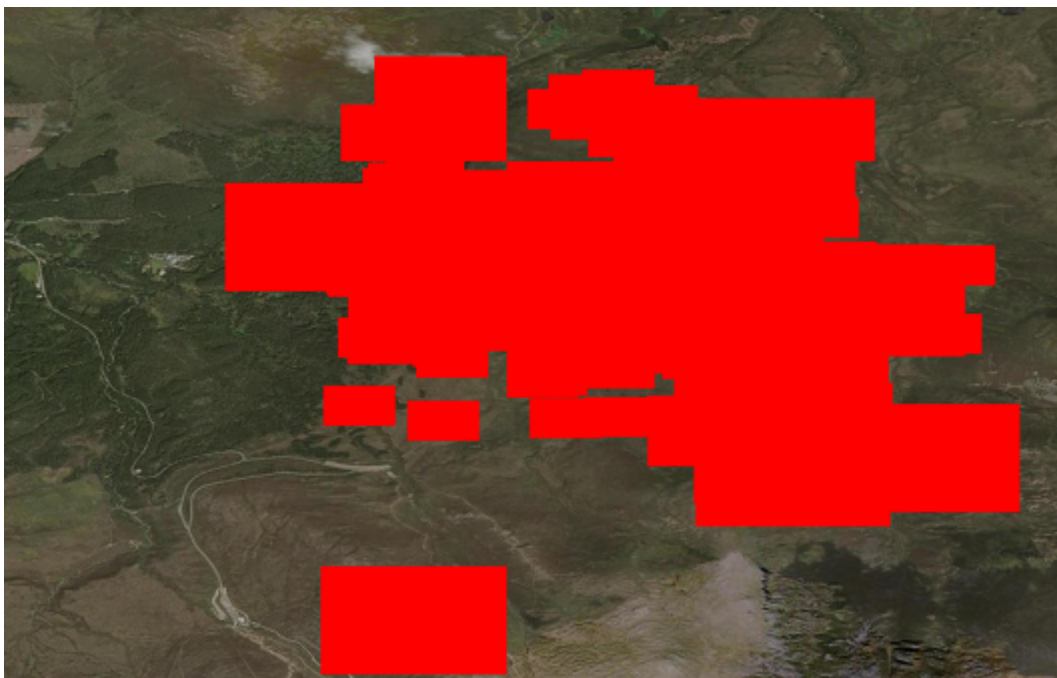
In its initial news release on the fire on Wednesday, SFRS reported they were deploying six appliances, one specialist wildfire unit and there was no mention of helicopters ([see here](#)). By Friday it was deploying – Nine fire appliances, two specialist wildfire units – as well as two helicopters ([see here](#)). Added to that resource were estate staff, including gamekeepers from neighbouring estates, as provided for in the IFMP.

The gamekeepers have been reported to have been trying to create fire breaks, which may explain some of the isolated areas of fires recorded by NASA:



The two red blocks at the bottom of this screenshot, taken at 21.30 on 16th July, may represent attempts to create firebreaks to stop the fire.

If that is the case, later data from NASA suggests the long fire break on the bottom right did not prevent the wildfire spreading south and east into Strath Nethy.



• Efforts are being targeted to contain the spread of the fire, and establish firebreaks. • Was the large area of red at the bottom on Sron Aonaich an attempt to create a fire break below the Ptarmigan restaurant and, if so, why does it appear so much larger than the two fire breaks above?

This is not to criticise people who were doing their best but it would be good to know why. Was it that some of the firebreaks didn't work? Or was it that more were needed and there were not sufficient skilled people on the ground to do this?

The fundamental question, however, is not the efforts of volunteers but whether SFRS could have prevented the wildfire from entering the Glen More catchment if they had deployed more units and helicopters within hours of being notified of the wildfire?

Given the physical difficulties of accessing the area by vehicle or on foot and transporting water to fight the fire, it seems to me the crucial issue is whether helicopters • which many local people and the RSPB were calling for • could have stopped the fire in its tracks before its front spread out? And, if not two helicopters, how many?

The CNPA's IFMP contains no concrete proposals for the deployment of helicopters, despite acknowledging that • wildfires may develop quite rapidly and there is limited time to refer to a prescriptive plan • and shunts responsibility for paying for helicopters onto individual landowners:

• The use of helicopters, including the authority to request helicopter assistance and adequate insurance to pay for helicopter costs, are all important issues to consider. •

While it is quite reasonable that the IFMP expects landowners to put out fires for which they are responsible (including muirburn that gets out of control), it does not appear to me reasonable to expect landowners to pay for all the costs of extinguishing fires created by someone else (including neighbouring landowners). That should be a public function.

The CNPA's IFMP states in relation to estate management plans that • the crucial issue here is the resources available to fight wildfires and the speed they can be mobilised • without mentioning the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. Actually, the crucial issue is the resources available to SFRS and it appears it is this which accounts for why the CNPA's IFMP has failed at its first major test.

Apart from looking at the causes of this wildfire therefore, it would be in the public interest for the SFRS to produce a report tracking its course with a focus on whether it could have been stopped before it spread out. Once they have done that Mr Gray should be in a better position to determine what resources the SFRS needs to fight wildfires effectively.

The wider consequences of the wildfire

This wildfire has had significant consequences for among other things people's health (smoke inhalation and closure of the most popular area in the National Park where people go to be healthy), the local economy (closure of local businesses) and conservation (the Caledonian pine forest, capercaillie, peat etc). I intend to write further about this but if we are to understand those consequences and learn

from them, that also needs to be informed by facts and research.

If the CNPA is serious about conservation, for example, it should get together with others such as Forest Research (the research arm of UK state forestry), undertake comprehensive surveys of the damage done by the fire over the next few weeks and then commit to monitoring what happens over the next decade.

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How badly have the mature Scots Pine visible in the burned areas been charred and are they still ab

While some of the initial photos looked shocking, nature could yet surprise us. Fire has long played an important role in the regeneration of the Caledonian pinewoods. If this fire had taken place in one of the woods on the Caledonian Pine Inventory that consist of a few straggling mature trees, with the land round about overgrazed, it could have spelled the end. But the area affected by this fire has very low deer numbers and represents one of the best examples of woodland natural regeneration in Scotland, the reason why planting Coire na Ciste was such a terrible idea [\(see here\)](#).

With the Caledonian pinewood steadily expanding up the hill, as long as the fire has not destroyed too many of mature Scots pine it may have created conditions where they can regenerate far more quickly than previously. If so, that would not mean the destruction was a good thing, only that there may be hope yet. We need to learn from how nature responds to disasters..

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. access rights
2. CNPA
3. conservation
4. Deer
5. outdoor recreation
6. Scottish Government

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