

The ‘Glenmore’ wildfire – a costly and avoidable disaster

Description



Can it be? With rain seemingly on top, an indication of the devastation caused by the blaze which somehow started on Wednesday. Investigations are continuing. Picture Will Boyd-Wallis

Photo credit Will Boyd-Wallis and the Badenoch and Strathspey Advertiser

[NB This post was updated and corrected at 18.50 on 19th July. I wrongly reported the local resident as having seen smoke at 11am on Weds 15th about 45 mins before the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service were alerted to the fire when he had seen smoke in that area the day before. It was completely my mistake and my apologies to him].

As the Strathly put it ([see here](#)), ‘heavenly help arrives in Strath Nethy after days of fire’. 4.11mm of rain was recorded as falling at Cairn Gorm on Saturday, enough it appears to put out the fire in the remote areas of Strath Nethy where it had spread after crossing into Glen More (as I described [here](#)).



Ever watchful: fire-fighters keep an eye on things despite the rainfall, and a big rota of volunteers remains in place just to be sure. Will Boyd-Wallis

Will Boyd Wallis, who works for the National Trust for Scotland, has done a public service in documenting, some of what happened on the ground

If 4.11mm of rain was enough to extinguish the fire, it suggests that it would not have required that much water to have extinguished it in its early stages:



Pic: RSPB Scotland/PA

The fire in its early stages photographed from near Ryvoan bothy. The time the photo was taken was not given

One wonders many helicopter water carries from Lochan Uaine, just over a kilometre away, would have been needed to contain and extinguish the wildfire at this stage on its first day? When helicopters were eventually deployed, around two days later, Lochan Uaine at the Pass of Ryvoan was used to source

the water that was used to contain its spread into the Caledonian Pinewood. (Lochan aâ?? Gharbh-choire is located even closer to the area in the photo but I donâ??t know if it is deep enough for helicopters to source water).

During the early stages of the wildfire the RSPB, who own the land in Strath Nethy, made calls for helicopter help. None arrived, with the Scotsman reporting ([see here](#)) an RSPB spokesperson as saying:

â??We have no helicopter support, as we believe they are all deployed to England and Wales fighting wildfires down there.

â??This is critical and we need it urgently to bring the fire under control.â?•

Another article in the Scotsman reported ([see here](#)) that:

â??Initially, they [the RSPB] were told adequate assistance had been deployed [i.e no helicopters were needed].

Scottish justice secretary Neil Gray said on Thursday afternoon that the fire was â??containedâ?• [this was before helicopters were deployed] and that the Scottish Government would be reviewing the situation should anything change.â??

Clearly, adequate assistance hadnâ??t been deployed. That failure allowed the wildfire to spread and grow in size making it far far harder to extinguish. The eventual arrival of helicopters on Friday provides confirmation of that.

After my last post, in which I reported that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) had been alerted to the fire at 11.47 on Wednesday 15th, I was contacted by a local resident who thought they had seen smoke in the sky around 11am on Tuesday 14th. Although wondering if he imagined it, that deserves to be investigated by the SFRS.

That prompted the thought that, while it does not yet appear to have been made public how long the fire had been burning when reported to SFRS on the 15th or when the smoke or flames were first seen, every minute could have made a difference. As the resident helpfully remarked, the lesson is, if you see smoke, report it.

Now imagine that the SFRS had 24 access to a helicopter, which could also carry water, and had used this to check the source of the smoke when first seen. SFRS could then have started to respond to this wildfire at the scene several hours earlier than they did and when it was much smaller. There appears to me a very strong case that if this wildfire had been responded to promptly and with the appropriate equipment, it could have been extinguished and most of its damaging impacts could have been avoided.

The consequences of cuts to the SFRS

As the wildfire was raging in Glen More, Katy Clark MSP was raising in the Scottish Parliament concerns about the latest round of cuts to the SFRS ([see here](#)). These cuts, and the requirement of managers to balance budgets, explain why the SFRS is so reluctant to deploy helicopters. They may also help explain why the Justice Secretary, Neil Gray, tried to claim the wildfire was under control, when it clearly wasn't. The Scottish Government appears to be in denial that cuts in public services have consequences.

The delay in engaging helicopters, which were then need for many hours, to fight this fire may well have cost SFRS far more than if they had deployed helicopters immediately and put the wildfire out.

The wider costs of cuts in the SFRS's budget to local communities and the environment are enormous. The Strathy and other local media are full of stories about the financial consequences of the fire, with many local businesses losing significant amounts of money in prime holiday season. Those losses will be far far more than the cost of SFRS having helicopters available to respond rapidly to wildfires.

As for the environment, the Cairngorms National Park Authority's targets for net zero, woodland expansion and protection of designated sites would all appear to have gone up in smoke. Clearly, they need to start reviewing their Integrated Fire Management Plan now in the light of its failure to prevent the damage caused by this fire. Central to that should be quantifying what public resources are needed to prevent such disasters occurring in future. All the volunteers who fought against insuperable odds to limit the damage deserve no less.

Update

A reader has made me aware of an eyewitness account of the start of the fire by a hillwalker which appeared on WalkHighland on Thursday (see [here](#)). It is essential reading for anyone interested in wildfires and how to prevent them. It shows attempts were made to report the smoke as soon as it was spotted, asks where the helicopters were and comments how the first vehicles to get to the scene of the fire had no water to fight it.

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