Best Practice Guide 7: Burning in the uplands of south-west England [revised draft 4.2, 12 August 2009]

Purpose of guide

1. The Heather and Grass Burning Regulations were updated in 2007 to cover the basic legal requirements that burners should meet. An updated Heather and Grass Burning Code was also launched aiming to describe a standard of good practice and to raise awareness of the relevant laws, helping burners to burn safely and in ways which can benefit the environment. This note aims to provide additional guidance for burning in the uplands of south-west England.

Background

2. Reflecting climatic differences and generally lower altitudes, moorland in the south-west supports rather different vegetation communities to much of the rest of the English uplands. Western heath is particularly characteristic of some areas. It typically contains abundant western gorse and bristle bent, with several heather (ericaceous) species present in variable amounts. The higher gorse content tends to result in hotter burns. Purple moor-grass also tends to be widespread, especially on blanket bog and in other mires and wet situations, but also extends in to drier habitats, often in mosaics with heathland. Where grazing is insufficient to remove the litter, it is often burnt. Particularly on Dartmoor and Bodmin Moor, numerous boulders often make the creation of firebreaks difficult, and burns on both western heath and purple moor-grass can be difficult to control.

3. The growing season also tends to be longer in the south-west and the wet, oceanic climate (characteristic of the west in general) results in a reduced number of days when burning is possible. It can also result in earlier breeding of some moorland birds and earlier emergence of reptiles.

4. Red grouse are only present in small numbers on Dartmoor, and probably now extinct or nearly so on Exmoor, and there is little history of typical grouse moor burning practices (of burning heather in long narrow strips on short rotations) characteristic of many northern moors. Most burning is carried out for agricultural reasons to promote grass growth for livestock or, more recently, for conservation purposes to promote structural diversity, particularly of dry heath, and prevent succession to scrub.

5. These features of the south-west have impacts on local burning practices and historically have resulted in a tendency to have larger burns, particularly where purple moor-grass and/or western gorse is present or where rocky terrain prevents the creation of firebreaks. The very large and frequent agricultural burns, particularly of purple moor-grass grass moorland and blanket bog, are, however, becoming less prevalent, though occasional large ‘wildfires’ still occur.

6. The south-west uplands are particularly rich in archeological and historical features and management of these may sometimes take precedence, for

example in the Premier Archaeological Landscapes identified on Dartmoor and Bodmin Moor. This may impact locally on burning practices.

Burning practices

7. Reflecting these factors, the following variations to good practice as defined in the Code are recommended for managed burning in the South West uplands:

- Burning should normally cease by 31 March rather than extending to the legal date of 15 April. This is particularly to avoid disturbance to ground-nesting birds, many of which arrive on the moors to breed during March and early April, but should also benefit reptiles.
- Burns should not be larger than 5 ha and ideally not larger than 2 ha. (Burns larger than 10 ha would represent a breach of the revised Regulations unless carried out under a licence from Natural England.)
- Burning in long narrow strips is not traditional practice on the south-west moors (though it may be beneficial for recolonisation by less mobile fauna and flora). Provided the recommended size is not exceeded, no maximum width need be specified.
- Because of the diversity of dwarf shrubs and other species, including western gorse, and the frequency of purple moor-grass, no minimum heather cover is specified before burning heather and other heath (c.f. 50% heather cover recommended in the Code).
- Western gorse is a natural component of the western heath community and areas with this species should be managed as heath rather than as European (common) gorse scrub (which is treated differently in the Code).
- Degraded bog vegetation, typically dominated by purple moor-grass, on deep peat (deeper than 50 cm) should be treated as blanket bog and should not normally be burnt.
- It some circumstances, particularly on areas of dry/humid heath dominated by western gorse, it may be acceptable to ‘back burn’, and hence create hotter fires, to remove material and allow recolonisation.

Further information

6. 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 www.naturalengland.org.uk/planning/farming-wildlife/burning. This also gives contact details for Natural England’s regional offices, which can be contacted to discuss burning. Hard copies of the above publications are available from:

Defra publications

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