

DARTMOOR FIRE AND HABITAT MANAGEMENT ROUNDTABLE: POLICY, PRACTICE AND PARTNERSHIP



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AT A GLANCE

The roundtable brought together commoners, fire services, conservation bodies, land managers and owners, researchers and public bodies to explore the role of prescribed burning within wider Dartmoor land management. The discussion showed broad agreement that prescribed burning should be viewed as one tool alongside grazing, cutting, peatland restoration and wider habitat management, considered on a case by case basis. Climate change is increasing wildfire risk on Dartmoor and it was agreed that this risk needs to be mitigated against. Fuel management, firebreaks, mapping, coordinated response, local knowledge and the Dartmoor Fire Plan all play important roles in wildfire resilience.

Key uncertainties remain around the role of prescribed burning on deep peat, how transferable evidence is from other upland areas, how best to manage *Molinia*-dominated systems, the comparative impacts of burning, grazing, cutting and rewetting over time, and how climate change may affect future burning windows and habitat impacts. Progress will depend on continued partnership, practical learning and constructive dialogue across stakeholders.

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

1. Continue supporting and resourcing the **Dartmoor Fire Plan** and partnership working (led by Dartmoor Fires Partnership members).
2. Improve **communication** and shared understanding around why prescribed burning is used, how it is regulated and how it fits within wider land management (led by Dartmoor Fires Partnership).
3. **Translate existing evidence** into a Dartmoor context, particularly relating to *Molinia*, deep peat and wildfire resilience (led by DLUMG in collaboration with Dartmoor Fires Partnership).
4. Develop more **Dartmoor-specific evidence** through monitoring, practical trials and shared learning (led by Dartmoor Fires Partnership with input from DLUMG).
5. Explore in more detail the learning from the New Forest's fire management approach and make **recommendations relating to transferable learning** from a long-term approach across Dartmoor (led by DLUMG in collaboration with Dartmoor Fires Partnership).
6. Support succession planning, training and skills transfer to ensure practical knowledge is retained for future generations. (led by Dartmoor Fires Partnership).

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INTRODUCTION

Controlled burning (or swaling as it is referred to on Dartmoor) is the traditional practice of burning moorland vegetation - such as gorse, heather, and grass – conducted to manage overgrowth, reduce wildfire risks and encourage new growth for grazing animals. There is a legal framework which structures the use of this method and this also defines the time of year when it is lawful to implement.

The swaling roundtable on 11 May 2026 was convened in response to Recommendation 20 of the Fursdon Review, which called for a debate on the use of controlled burning on Dartmoor, informed by evidence and practical experience.

This shared learning and discussion roundtable was convened by the Dartmoor Land Use Management Group. This group was established on the recommendation of the Fursdon Review and one of its key objectives is to support better governance and decision making over Dartmoor land management.

The event brought together representatives from commoning, farming, conservation, fire and rescue services, land management and ownership, public bodies, academia and research organisations.



Fogging machines, photo credit: Tracy May

SUMMARY OF LEARNING FROM PRESENTATIONS

Eight experts were invited to present to the group on the day of the roundtable. A summary of presentations can be found in Appendix 2. The speakers covered the existing regulatory framework, wildfire risk and response, the practical application of prescribed burning for a range of outcomes – wildfire mitigation, control of overly dominant vegetation, habitat enhancement and grazing management. An overview of related evidence and data was provided by both Natural England and University of Exeter.

The presentations showed how closely prescribed burning is tied to wider land use management decisions on Dartmoor. Speakers repeatedly stressed that controlled burning cannot be considered in isolation and needs to be considered as part of a management toolkit, alongside methods such as, cutting, peatland restoration (hydrological enhancement being considered a key means of reducing *Molinia* dominance) and grazing. The importance of an appropriate post burn grazing strategy was identified as key to ensure onward management of burnt sites, and to avoid reversion and need for repeat burning.

Several speakers highlighted increasing wildfire risk linked to climate change, causing increased vegetation growth and fuel build-up, particularly *Molinia* and western gorse. Presentations from commoners and Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service showed how working together over the last two decades has improved wildfire planning and response on Dartmoor.

The existing Dartmoor Fire Plan Partnership highlighted substantial practical investment in wildfire resilience, including approximately 80km of firebreak cutting, track and river crossing improvements, and shared digital mapping systems. Comparisons between the 2007 North Moor wildfire (1,553ha) and the 2025 Fur Tor wildfire (421ha) were presented as evidence that improved planning, fuel-load management and operational coordination appears to have improved wildfire response and containment. The Dartmoor Fire Plan is taking a Dartmoor wide, strategic approach to mitigating wildfire risk, guided by Dartmoor Commoners' Council with a range of partners, including the Fire Service, National Park and Natural England. It connects with fire plans for each common, supported by agri-environment schemes. This plan encompasses all Dartmoor commons, but it is reliant on voluntary time from its leads and a finite amount of resource from the Farming in Protected Landscapes Scheme.

A strong distinction was made between prescribed burning and uncontrolled wildfire. Whilst 'wildfire' is the term used, such fires are typically caused by human accidents.

Research presented by University of Exeter suggested that low severity prescribed / controlled burns primarily affect surface vegetation and result in limited soil heating that does not cause negative soil or seed bank impact, whereas wildfires typically burn more intensely and can penetrate the soil meaning that in peat conditions, the peat can ignite and burn for a

considerable period, causing substantial carbon loss, exacerbation of *Molinia* dominance, and long-term environmental damage.

The ecological role of fire featured strongly in discussions throughout the day. Presenters highlighted the role that prescribed burning can play in maintaining habitat mosaics, supporting grazing systems and managing dense vegetation. At the same time, presentations from Natural England highlighted ongoing uncertainty and disagreement within parts of the evidence base, particularly around burning on deep peat, *Molinia*-dominated systems and how far evidence from other upland areas transfers to Dartmoor conditions.

The presentations highlighted increasing regulatory complexity, including the post-2021 licensing framework for burning on peat deeper than 30cm and growing emphasis on integrated, long-term vegetation management approaches.

Key learning for Dartmoor

- Climate change is increasing vegetation growth, fuel load and wildfire risk across Dartmoor.
- Fuel-load management, access, operational planning and coordinated response are seen as critical to wildfire resilience.
- Long-term partnership working between commoners, fire services, land managers, owners and other partners, has significantly strengthened wildfire preparedness and response. The emerging Dartmoor Fire Plan is an excellent example, but such initiatives lack sufficient consistent, long-term support, which is a key issue.
- Commoners' local knowledge and skills are critical during wildfire response and they provide a vital, wildfire trained resource.
- Prescribed burning and uncontrolled wildfire can have very different ecological and carbon impacts, with the latter often causing significant negative issues
- Research presented suggested that low severity "cool burns" may avoid significant peat heating under controlled conditions, while severe wildfires can result in major peat carbon loss.
- Fire, grazing and disturbance by animals were presented as important part of the dynamic process needed to stimulate the maintenance and enhancement of heathland habitats and habitat mosaics.
- Different habitats and vegetation types require different management approaches and levels of intervention.
- Rewetting of peat and controlled hydrology is accepted as reducing wildfire risks, but is not possible in all areas.
- There remains debate around parts of the evidence base, particularly regarding deep peat, *Molinia*-dominated systems and the transferability of evidence to Dartmoor conditions.
- Controlled burning now operates within a more complex licensing and evidence framework than previously and licences are processed by Defra.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

Participants agreed that the phrase prescribed burning is preferable to controlled burning as it indicates that a considered and evidenced decision has been taken carefully in the best interests of the moor's health.

The discussions usefully articulated the role of prescribed burning as part of the management toolkit for Dartmoor and the strength of different views on the subject. While there were areas of disagreement, there was also broad agreement that prescribed burning should not be treated as a standalone activity and instead considered alongside grazing, cutting, peatland restoration and wider habitat management. The regulatory framework was accepted and there are clear grounds which set out, where applicable, when a licence and or SSSI consent to undertake the activity is needed.

The most significant disagreements centred on burning on deep peat, the interpretation of the evidence base and the extent to which existing research is transferable to Dartmoor conditions. Participants repeatedly returned to the need for site-specific judgement informed by local knowledge and practical management experience. Environmental campaigning NGOs opposed burning on deep peat on Dartmoor, even if a positive case was made, due to national policy positions and the message it would send out to other regions.

Climate change was discussed repeatedly, particularly concerns that changing conditions are increasing wildfire risk and narrowing safe burning windows whilst risk itself increases as fuel load develops if not managed appropriately. Participants also highlighted tensions between biodiversity conservation, wildfire resilience, carbon storage, grazing systems and public safety.

There was strong support for retaining commoners and local land managers at the centre of future approaches, alongside recognition of the importance of succession planning, practical skills and viable farming systems.

Several practical themes came up in discussions, including fuel-load management, firebreaks, use of patch burns to encourage livestock to spread out and provide aftermath grazing, digital mapping and the need for more practical and locally relevant evidence gathering through trials and experimentation.

AREAS OF BROAD AGREEMENT

- There is already a substantial body of evidence on controlled burning.
- Case-by-case decision making is required.
- Outcomes vary depending on weather, habitat type, peat condition, hydrology, vegetation structure, grazing and management history.
- Controlled burning cannot be considered in isolation from grazing, cutting, rewetting and wider land management.
- Wildfire generally causes greater damage, particularly where peat ignites and where they occur during nesting, reptile and insect emergence periods.
- Climate change is altering conditions and management assumptions, including burning windows, vegetation growth and wildfire risk.
- A changing climate will require institutional flexibility to enable local flexibility.
- More Dartmoor-specific evidence, monitoring and practical learning from real sites and experimental approaches would help improve future decision making.
- “Less is more” and multiple patch burns are often better for Dartmoor.
- Prescribed burning is an appropriate term for this activity, respecting the customary Dartmoor term of ‘swaling’ which could continue to sit alongside reference to ‘prescribed burning’
- Support for the Dartmoor Fire Plan and its resourcing
- Support for adherence to the 31st March as the recommended cut-off date for burning each year, as currently recommended by the Dartmoor Swaling Code of Conduct

AREAS OF UNCERTAINTY OR DISAGREEMENT

- How far current evidence reflects real-world Dartmoor management systems and practical realities.
- The long-term impacts of prescribed burning on peat systems, especially deep peat.
- Whether prescribed burning on deep peat can ever be appropriate, even under controlled conditions.
- How much confidence should be placed in current peat maps and peat depth data.
- The role of burning in managing *Molinia*-dominated systems on Dartmoor, particularly on or near peat soils and also on peat soils which are not feasible for hydrological restoration, but which are *Molinia* dominated.
- Whether cutting, grazing or rewetting can achieve equivalent wildfire resilience and habitat outcomes at an efficient scale for Dartmoor.
- The comparative effectiveness of different vegetation management combinations over long timescales.
- Whether / how prescribed burning contributes to or reduces long-term wildfire risk.
- The extent to which restored peatlands reduce wildfire severity in Dartmoor conditions.
- The most appropriate scales, frequencies and spatial patterns for prescribed burning on Dartmoor landscapes.
- How climate change could alter current seasonal restrictions, operational thresholds and management approaches.
- The impacts of climate change-driven changes to burning windows, and linked impacts on birds, invertebrates and wider ecological systems in the South West.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. BUILD ON THE DARTMOOR FIRE PLAN

Continue supporting and resourcing the Dartmoor Fire Plan, including partnership working, firebreak management, mapping, training, equipment and coordinated wildfire response.

2. TRANSLATE EXISTING EVIDENCE INTO A DARTMOOR CONTEXT

A major area of disagreement is not whether evidence exists, but how far existing evidence is transferable to Dartmoor conditions. This is making it harder to identify genuine evidence gaps and areas of consensus. Priority should be given to improving understanding of how to manage *Molinia* on deep peat and the comparative impacts of different management approaches under Dartmoor conditions. This could include more Dartmoor-specific monitoring, practical trials and shared learning between practitioners, researchers and public bodies. Future work should also recognise that some disagreements may reflect differing values, priorities and risk tolerances, rather than scientific uncertainty alone.

3. IMPROVE COMMUNICATION AND SHARED UNDERSTANDING

Improving communication around prescribed burning is essential. The discussions highlighted gaps in awareness about existing activity, partnership working and management approaches already underway. Clearer communication, transparency and regular information sharing would help build trust, reduce misunderstanding and support ongoing constructive dialogue. This should include clearer public communication about why prescribed burning is used, where it sits within wider land management, and how it is regulated and monitored.

4. EXPLORE OPTIONS FOR STRATEGIC OVERSIGHT AND COORDINATION

Participants repeatedly identified the need for clearer strategic prescribed burning coordination across Dartmoor. Further exploration should be given to whether a more formal oversight or advisory mechanism could support shared principles, long-term planning, operational coordination and collaborative decision making around fire and habitat management. This group should also hold responsibility for providing feedback to licensing bodies on the evolving impact of climate change in relation to prescribed burns. There was strong support for the Dartmoor Fire Plan and a consensus that this should continue to be supported, including in relation to making a case for ongoing funding support. Participants highlighted the value of learning from the New Forest, including the area's single Habitat Risk Assessment granted by Natural England that allows them to deliver their burning programme annually, without multiple annual consents.

5. BROADEN ENGAGEMENT IN FUTURE DISCUSSIONS

The roundtable highlighted the importance of stakeholder engagement in this subject. Whilst this was considered a technical workshop for practitioners and those directly involved in prescribed burning, it was recognised that there is a need to inform the public

about why this method is used and how.

6. ENSURE SUCCESSION PLANNING AND SKILLS TRANSFER

Significant expertise exists across Dartmoor on prescribed burning and wildfire management, much of it developed through decades of practical experience on the moor. Greater focus should be given to succession planning, training and knowledge sharing to ensure practical expertise, local knowledge and operational capability are passed to the next generation. It was identified that any future discussions should involve the younger generation of commoners as well.



2007 Wild-fire on North More (1,553ha burnt, photo credit: Tracy May)

APPENDIX 1: ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

REPRESENTED

- Commoners and farmers
- Devon & Somerset Fire and Rescue Service
- Conservation and land management organisations
- Natural England
- RSPB
- National Trust
- Dartmoor National Park Authority
- Forestry England / New Forest representatives
- Landowner representatives
- South West Water
- Academic and research organisations
- Archaeologists

UNDERREPRESENTED

N.B. Whilst this was a technical event for those directly involved in land management, future engagement should consider the following:

- Other NGOs
- Foresters
- Hill Farm Project
- Carbon sequestration experts
- Defra
- Young farmers and commoners
- Recreation and access groups
- Tourism sector representatives
- Public health representatives
- Wider community and public representatives



APPENDIX 2: LEARNING PRESENTATIONS

USE OF CONTROLLED BURNING ON DARTMOOR AND THE DARTMOOR FIRE PLAN

Tracy May, Chair, Dartmoor Commoners' Council

Tracy May outlined the development of wildfire management plan for Dartmoor coordinated by a partnership. This achieves a move from fragmented local fire plans, to a coordinated Dartmoor-wide approach connected to a fire plan for each common. The presentation contrasted prescribed burning with uncontrolled wildfire, describing prescribed burns as a long-standing management tool used to break up dense vegetation, support grazing and create / maintain habitat mosaics, while uncontrolled fires often burn much larger areas, reduce habitat diversity and can cause long-term environmental damage.

The presentation traced the development of wildfire planning following major fires on Dartmoor, including fires in 2002 (345ha), 2003 (852ha) and the 2007 North Moor wildfire, which burned 1,553ha. Following the 2007 fire, commoners concluded there needed to be “a better way to fight a fire on the remote parts of the moor”. This led to development of specialist quad-bike mounted fogging equipment, described in the presentation as a “total game changer” (see page 4 for photograph). Eight units were purchased for the Forest of Dartmoor.

The presentation highlighted major practical investment through the Dartmoor Fires Partnership, including approximately 80km of firebreak cutting over two years; approximately 2km of track repairs; approximately 40 river crossing improvements; digital mapping of high-risk areas, water sources, access routes; and firebreaks using QField systems shared across organisations. A comparison was presented between the 2007 North Moor wildfire (1,553ha) and the 2025 Fur Tor wildfire (421ha), with it being clear that a combination of proactive management and stakeholder knowledge of previous fires made significant contributions.

WILDFIRE RISK, MITIGATION AND RESPONSE

Ian Donovan, Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service

Ian Donovan focused on the realities of wildfire response across Dartmoor and the importance of close working between fire services, commoners and land managers. He described the development of tactical wildfire plans, specialist wildfire officers, improved communication systems and operational protocols linked to swaling notifications and risk assessments. The presentation highlighted increasing wildfire risks linked to climate change, vegetation build-up and access challenges across remote moorland landscapes. The cost to Devon and Somerset of fighting wild-fires is typically in the region of £1 million per year, also pulling vital resources away from urban areas where it is needed.

The presentation highlighted the importance of active vegetation and fuel-load management through grazing, cutting, mowing, rewetting “where feasible” and controlled winter burning “where appropriate”.

The presentation also described changing wildfire conditions on Dartmoor linked to climate change. It noted that warmer, wetter growing conditions are increasing vegetation growth, particularly western gorse and *Molinia*, creating large areas of dense, highly flammable fuel that livestock graze for only limited periods of the year, if at all, due to its coarse nature.

Ian highlighted concerns regarding peat wildfires, noting that once fires enter peat they become extremely difficult to extinguish and can cause “significant carbon release” and environmental damage lasting “for decades, if not centuries to come”. At the same time, the presentation stated that peatland restoration alone has not yet removed wildfire risk because surface vegetation fires continue to occur before blanket bog systems fully recover.

The presentation outlined the operational wildfire management system now in place, including tactical wildfire plans; wildfire support officers; digital mapping; swaling notification systems; risk assessments linked to weather, wind, peat depth and nearby infrastructure; use of What3Words for remote locations.

In 2022 approximately 360ha was subject to prescribed burning across Dartmoor, described as around 1% of total landscape. In 2024-25, 165 prescribed burns recorded across Devon and Somerset. And in 2026: approximately 60 prescribed burns followed a wet winter and late burning season.

USE OF FIRE TO RESTORE NATURE

Andy Byfield, Independent Botanist

Andy Byfield explored the ecological role of fire within heathland systems, drawing on long-term field observation and habitat management experience. The presentation argued that fire, grazing and disturbance are important ecological processes in maintaining dynamic heathland systems – quoting Clive Chatters’ description of heathland dynamism being dependent on “fire, ground disturbance and herbivory”.

The presentation referenced work from the New Forest and the Lizard in Cornwall. A central theme was the impact of succession and humus build-up within unmanaged mixed heath systems. Evidence presented from mixed heath habitats suggested that over-mature heathland can become species poor, while carefully burnt areas can become significantly more species rich. Andy evidenced burnt heath as “nearly four times richer botanically-speaking” compared to over-mature mixed heath.

The presentation highlighted several ecological benefits of prescribed burning:

- creating palatable forage attractive to livestock which in turn stimulate the dynamics of ecological function
- encouraging more even grazing across a landscape
- reducing dense vegetation
- exposing mineral soil and supporting seed germination
- benefiting rare species
- maintaining habitat mosaics.

There was also strong emphasis on “cool burns”, arguing that carefully planned low severity burns leave soils and seed banks “unharmd”.

AN OVERVIEW OF SCIENCE AND EVIDENCE FROM NATURAL ENGLAND

Alice Noble, Senior Advisor, Natural England

Alice Noble summarised the current evidence base relating to prescribed burning, wildfire and upland peatland systems. The presentation referenced Natural England’s major evidence reviews, including a review of 225 studies examining the effects of prescribed burning on biodiversity, carbon and water in upland peatlands.

The presentation stressed the importance of considering regional differences, noting that much of the evidence base comes from the Pennines and that factors such as climate, vegetation type, growing season and bird breeding dates may differ significantly in the South West.

Findings presented included:

- repeated burning can alter vegetation composition and prevent recovery of some communities.
- medium to long-term burning may worsen dominance of *Molinia*, gorse and bracken.
- burning can increase bare ground and alter bryophyte communities.
- approximately 80% of above-ground carbon is lost during combustion
- burning can alter water chemistry, dissolved organic carbon and hydrology.

The presentation also highlighted that the 2025 Heather and Grass Management Code advise against burning *Molinia*, gorse and bracken-dominated systems because burning may perpetuate dominance or lead to difficult-to-control fires.

On wildfire, the presentation highlighted:

- evidence that some upland wildfires originate from managed burns escaping control.
- the importance of vegetation biomass and structure in wildfire behaviour
- evidence that restored peatlands may be more resilient to wildfire.
- limited UK evidence on the effectiveness of vegetation management for reducing wildfire severity.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE DEFRA CONTROLLED BURNING REGULATIONS AND PROCESS

Sally Marshall, Principal Officer (Uplands), Natural England

Sally Marshall outlined the current legal framework governing prescribed burning in England. The presentation explained that the 2021 regulations introduced a licensing regime for burning on peat deeper than 30cm across all Less Favoured Areas, rather than a blanket ban.

Grounds for licence applications include:

- conservation or management of the natural or historic environment
- public safety
- wildfire risk reduction
- research or education purposes.

The presentation also clarified the relationship between the 2007 and 2021 regulations, noting that in some circumstances both Natural England and Defra consents may be required.

The updated Heather and Grass Management Code (2025) was highlighted as placing greater emphasis on:

- multi-year strategic management plans
- integrated management approaches including grazing, cutting and rewetting
- updated evidence relating to peatlands and vegetation change.

IMPACTS OF PRESCRIBED BURNING VERSUS WILDFIRES, MOLINIA FIRE RISK AND EMISSIONS

Professor Claire Belcher, University of Exeter

Professor Claire Belcher presented research comparing prescribed burning and wildfire impacts, particularly in relation to peat/soil heating, burn severity and carbon emissions. The presentation stressed the distinction between prescribed burns undertaken by trained teams and uncontrolled wildfires.

Research presented suggested:

- prescribed burns undertaken under UK standards resulted in low severity burns. As a result no material damage to soil or subsurface material such as seed, was found.
- no severity 4 or 5 burns were recorded within the prescribed burns studied.
- soil heating at 3cm depth remained low during prescribed burns.
- prescribed burns largely affect surface vegetation rather than igniting peat soils.
- The presentation contrasted this with severe wildfires, which can lead to major peat carbon loss. Examples included: Tavy Cleave wildfire emitted approximately three times more carbon per m² than the Mutters Moor prescribed burn comparison; and Langdale Moor wildfire was estimated to have emitted approximately 37,361 tonnes of carbon from peat combustion.

The presentation also suggested that some fuel-managed areas escaped severe wildfire impacts, although no claim was made that management alone prevented wildfire spread.

N.B. the presentation focused on above-ground biomass and soil heating within specific prescribed burn conditions. It was less clear how transferable findings are across all Dartmoor vegetation types, peat conditions and management systems.

FIRE AS A STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT TOOL: COMMONING, NATURE, RISK MITIGATION

Dave Morris, Open Habitats Manager, Forestry England

Dave Morris presented practical experience from the New Forest, where prescribed burning forms part of wider heathland and grazing management systems. The presentation highlighted the long-standing statutory requirement within the New Forest to maintain open habitats suitable for commoning and biodiversity.

Benefits of prescribed burning presented included:

- habitat diversity
- removal of accumulated biomass
- maintaining low nutrient conditions
- supporting grazing livestock and creation / maintenance of habitat mosaics
- cost effectiveness compared with some mechanical management approaches which also use significant fuel.

The presentation also covered practical operational considerations including:

- planning and mapping burn proposals including governance oversight via the Commons Oversight Committee
- firebreak preparation
- PPE
- wind direction
- back burning techniques
- vegetation regeneration following burning.

SOUTH WEST WATER PERSPECTIVE ON PEATLAND CONDITION AND RESTORATION

David Smith, Natural Resources Manager, South West Water

David Smith discussed peatland condition and restoration challenges across Dartmoor, including the complexity and variability of deep peat systems. The presentation highlighted the practical and financial challenges of peatland restoration, including ditch blocking and rewetting, and stressed that peat depth alone does not determine ecological condition or restoration potential.

Key learning for Dartmoor included:

- Deep peat systems vary significantly in condition and restoration potential.
- Peatland restoration can be expensive, disruptive and long-term.
- Hydrology, slope, humus and vegetation condition all influence restoration outcomes.
- Some Dartmoor landscapes may have limited restoration potential despite peat depth which will worsen with climate change meaning that hydrological restoration cannot be singularly relied on as a means of achieving wild-fire mitigation.

APPENDIX 3: NOTES OF DISCUSSION

1. WHAT WOULD A BEST PRACTICE, INTEGRATED FIRE AND HABITAT MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR DARTMOOR LOOK LIKE?

Discussion highlighted the need to move from a largely reactive wildfire response approach towards a more co-ordinated, long-term and landscape-scale fire and habitat management framework for Dartmoor. Participants emphasised that prescribed burning should sit within a broader land management approach linked to grazing, habitat condition, wildfire resilience and viable farming systems.

Key themes included:

- A need for better co-ordination across Dartmoor, including closer collaboration between commons. The emerging Fire Plan was supported, and enthusiasm was expressed for its continuation and funding.
- A need for clear governance, agreed principles and strategic oversight, with some further discussion on models such as the New Forest's Commons Oversight Committee was identified as beneficial.
- Fire and habitat management plans should recognise the complexity and variation of Dartmoor habitats and mosaics, including different responses and management needs for habitats such as Molinia, bracken and deep peat systems.
- Participants felt there is already substantial evidence available but identified a gap in Dartmoor-specific research and practical evidence to guide local decision making.
- The importance of keeping systems practical and workable was emphasised repeatedly. Participants stressed the need to “keep it simple”, while still allowing plans to remain adaptive and agile as conditions change.
- Long-term planning was seen as important, including questions around whether plans should operate over 50 or even 100-year timescales, while remaining flexible enough to respond to changing ecological and climate conditions.
- Resourcing is a major issue, including questions around future fire plan capacity, staffing, oversight, funding and the mechanics needed to support implementation.
- Participants highlighted the importance of an “on the ground up” approach, including local knowledge, succession planning, stocking guidance and ensuring that farming and commoning businesses remain viable within future management approaches.

2. WHAT CRITERIA SHOULD DETERMINE WHEN, WHERE, AND HOW BURNING IS CONDUCTED ON DARTMOOR?

The discussion explored the practical, ecological and governance criteria that should guide prescribed burning on Dartmoor. Participants repeatedly stressed that decisions about burning cannot be separated from the wider question of why burning is taking place and what outcomes land managers are seeking to achieve.

Key themes included:

WHY

- The original framing of the question was challenged because it focused on when, where and how burning should occur, without explicitly addressing why burning is being undertaken in the first place.
- Burning is accepted by many as a legitimate management tool for controlling tall, dense or unmanaged vegetation.
- Burning was discussed as one tool within a wider land management system, particularly in relation to grazing management. Participants highlighted the role burning can play in creating grazing opportunities and encouraging livestock to use wider areas of the moor.
- Ecological and practical considerations included archaeology protection, tick control, species management and the need to balance habitat outcomes with wildfire risk reduction. Dartmoor research on tick burden is underway, which includes the relationship between ticks and vegetation.
- Follow-up management was seen as critical. Participants highlighted that burning alone is insufficient if grazing systems, livestock numbers and subsequent land management are not in place to achieve intended outcomes. “The right livestock, in the right numbers, in the right location” was generally agreed.

WHEN

- Timing was seen as increasingly complex due to changing climate conditions. Participants discussed the constraints of the current 31 March cut-off, variation between cold and warm springs, and concerns that climate change may be narrowing safe burning windows.
- Autumn burning was viewed as increasingly challenging due to often wet weather. This leaves a narrow window for action, typically between January and the 31st March. There was consensus that the existing, promoted cut-off date of 31st March promoted as such in the Dartmoor National Park Swaling Code of Conduct, should be adhered to, as opposed to the 15th April.

WHERE

- There was recognition that some areas may require non-intervention approaches due to ecological sensitivity, accessibility constraints, lack of resources or, most importantly, where burning is not necessary.
- The discussion repeatedly returned to the importance of local knowledge and site-specific assessment. Walk-over inspections, local insight, commons associations and landowners were all seen as important in identifying where burning or cutting may be appropriate.

HOW

- There was strong emphasis on the importance of skilled, trained practitioners, alongside recognition that training and certification opportunities have improved. Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service formally train commoners and LANTRA also offer courses.
- The current regulatory system was viewed by some as overly complex, with discussion around whether governance, licensing and oversight arrangements could be simplified through clearer strategic structures or oversight bodies. The New Forest has one Habitat Risk Assessment granted to it by Natural England which allows them to deliver their burning programme annually, without multiple annual consents. It was noted that such an approach might be linked to the Dartmoor Fire Plan.
- Scale and frequency of burns generated significant discussion. Mosaic or patch burning approaches were widely referenced. There was general agreement that “less is more” and potentially Dartmoor needs more small-scale patch burning, alongside the principle that burns should be proportionate to landscape context rather than based on fixed rotation rules alone as per the New Forest approach. Many agri-environment agreements used a 2ha limit for individual burns, although exceptions could be agreed in some HLS management plans.
- Participants questioned whether “rotational burning” is a helpful term, suggesting that more adaptive and interactive vegetation management approaches are needed. Prescribed burning was supported as a more appropriate term, inferring via this name that there are informed reasons why burning is taking place as the chosen management method.
- Practical suggestions included the use of checklists, digital tools or apps to support logging of burning need, decision making, consistency and compliance in future burning management approaches, linked to the Dartmoor Fire Plan.

3. WHERE DO STAKEHOLDERS DISAGREE, WHAT TRADE-OFFS ARE ACCEPTABLE, WHAT ARE NON-NEGOTIABLES, AND WHAT EVIDENCE COULD HELP RESOLVE THESE DIFFERENCES?

The discussion highlighted significant differences in perspectives around the role of prescribed burning on Dartmoor, particularly in relation to peatland management, wildfire risk, biodiversity outcomes and the future of upland land management. Participants stressed that many issues require site-by-site judgement.

Key themes included:

- One of the most significant areas of disagreement related to burning on peatlands, particularly deep peat areas over 30cm. Participants discussed tensions between peat restoration priorities, wildfire risk management and the practical realities of managing dense vegetation across vast Dartmoor landscapes. Participants also noted that the England Peat Map is not always accurate and therefore local testing is important as is the need to improve the mapping data.

- Questions were raised about whether exceptions may sometimes be needed within deep peat areas – for example where hydrological restoration is unfeasible and grazing across the landscape, to address *Molinia* dominance, is needed.
- Participants agreed that burning can play a role within land management, including for habitat management, grazing management and reducing wildfire risks that threaten homes, infrastructure and communities.
- At the same time, there was strong agreement that prescribed burning should not be treated as a standalone intervention. Cutting, grazing and wider land management approaches were consistently viewed as important complementary tools.
- Trade-offs between ecological outcomes, wildfire resilience and practical land management were discussed throughout. Participants highlighted the challenges of determining when burning should occur under changing climate conditions, including whether existing dates and restrictions remain appropriate.
- Mosaic burning approaches continued to feature strongly in discussions, including whether multiple smaller burns, such as repeated 2-hectare burns, may be preferable to larger-scale interventions in some contexts.
- There was discussion around the use of firebreaks, alongside wider questions about how prescribed burning should function within broader landscape-scale wildfire management approaches.
- Participants disagreed on the depth of evidence gaps and on how existing evidence is interpreted. Some felt that current evidence bases are incomplete, insufficiently representative or not always applicable to Dartmoor conditions.
- Research priorities identified included better evidence on wildfire severity reduction, the local impacts of controlled burning including on *Molinia* and fire risk, the timing of burns under changing climatic conditions and the effectiveness of alternative vegetation management and wildfire management approaches.
- Participants supported more standardised and practical evidence gathering, including test case studies and experimental approaches that could generate more consistent and locally relevant learning.
- There was recognition that data relating to bird breeding seasons, seasonal timing and weather conditions may need updating as climate patterns change.
- Licensing arrangements and governance challenges were also raised repeatedly, alongside concerns that current systems can lack flexibility during exceptional weather conditions or changing environmental circumstances. Future success under a changing climate will require institutional flexibility to enable local flexibility.
- Funding constraints are seen as a major barrier to effective long-term management, alongside concerns about maintaining local skills, technical expertise and practical land management capacity – particularly in terms of succession planning across generations.
- Strong support was expressed for retaining commoners and local land managers at the centre of future management approaches. Participants highlighted the need for sufficient employment opportunities, practical support and recognition of local expertise.
- Broader tensions were noted between different priorities and stakeholder perspectives, including biodiversity conservation, grazing, recreation, public safety, wildfire resilience, carbon storage and climate considerations.

- Discussions also reflected wider social and cultural differences between stakeholder groups, with references to differing perspectives among conservationists, commoners, visitors and other Dartmoor users.
- Some participants questioned whether cutting alone could achieve the same outcomes as integrated burning approaches, particularly in relation to wildfire resilience and managing dense molinia-dominated vegetation and litter / mulch layers which prevent seed germination and vegetation diversity.

4.HOW SHOULD CONTROLLED BURNING BE INTEGRATED WITH OTHER CONSERVATION TOOLS, SUCH AS GRAZING, CUTTING, AND PEATLAND REWETTING, AND WHAT KEY DATA OR RESEARCH GAPS NEED TO BE ADDRESSED TO SUPPORT DECISION MAKING?

The discussion focused on the need to view prescribed burning as one element within a wider and integrated land management system, rather than as a standalone intervention. Participants explored how burning interacts with grazing, cutting, peatland management, biodiversity outcomes and wildfire resilience, while also highlighting significant disagreement around the interpretation and use of evidence.

Key themes included:

- Participants repeatedly emphasised that controlled burning should be considered alongside other management approaches, including grazing, cutting and peatland rewetting, rather than in isolation.
- There was discussion around how targeted grazing could be better utilised to reduce the use of burning including perspectives linked to younger farmers and changing approaches to upland management. A current lack of cattle to deliver the grazing of the more coarse vegetation was referred to and if these are to come back a long-term management plan through vehicles such as Landscape Recovery is needed.
- The importance of technical expertise and collaboration was strongly emphasised, particularly in relation to planning, delivery and evaluation of integrated management approaches.
- Participants highlighted the potential role of experimental or co-ordinated burns in improving understanding of outcomes and generating more robust local evidence to inform future management decisions.
- Practicality and affordability were cited as important considerations throughout the discussion, with repeated references to the need for approaches that are realistic, deliverable and sufficiently resourced. The relative efficiency of burning and then aftermath grazing was mentioned in the context of the alternative use of machinery and fuel.
- Several participants stressed that the risks associated with inaction also need to be considered, particularly in relation to fuel build-up, wildfire severity and the long-term condition of habitats and designated sites.
- Protecting SSSIs and other sensitive habitats was seen by some as potentially requiring more active intervention and ongoing management, rather than less.

- There was discussion around operational and public safety concerns, including fears that visible prescribed burns may increase public reporting of fires or create additional pressures for fire and rescue services.
- Risks associated with ticks, dogs and public access were also raised within wider discussions about public health, recreation and land management.
- The impact of wildfires on increasing the practical and financial burden of response by the fire services was strongly agreed where management approaches fail or fires escalate beyond control.
- Participants repeatedly returned to the view that there is ongoing disagreement about the evidence base itself, including differences in how evidence is interpreted, applied and prioritised within decision making.
- Research and evidence gaps were therefore seen as central to future progress, particularly around understanding the comparative effectiveness of different management approaches, including burning, grazing, cutting and rewetting.
- Additional discussion touched on the possible role of trees and more diverse farming systems within future land management approaches, although these themes were not explored in detail during the session.



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