

# Wildfires in Northern Ireland

## Draft Strategic Way Forward



*Sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone.*

## Table of Contents

	Page
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2. Strategic Way Forward</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3. Governance</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>4. Engagement</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>5. Land Management</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>6. Response</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>7. Policy, Legislation, Enforcement</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>8. Evidence</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>9. Consultation Questions</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>10. Next Steps</b>	<b>11</b>

## 1. Introduction:

1.1 Wildfires are a threat to people, property, wildlife and the countryside and efforts to fight them are a drain on the public purse. Wildfires in Northern Ireland impact on large areas of landscape, particularly in heather or gorse dominated upland areas. These fires destroy biodiversity and affect air quality and water resources.

1.2 The current wildfire problem in NI is purely the result of human activity with wildfires being caused by accidental or by deliberate ignition. Consequently, our wildfires are largely preventable if everyone is vigilant to the risks of wildfire especially during periods of high risk.

1.3 The UK National Risk Register 2020 , the Independent Assessment of UK Climate Risk (CCRA3) and the Northern Ireland Climate Change Adaptation Programme 2019-24 have identified an increased threat of wildfires and associated impacts as a consequence of climate change and changing weather patterns. This has risks for our natural environment, biodiversity, agriculture and forestry.

1.4 The wildfire events of April and May 2011 were the catalyst for a significant change in the way that the wildfire problem in Northern Ireland was looked at. At one point the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) were tackling 140 wildfires a day. On the 2 May every NIFRS fire appliance, with the exception of those based on Rathlin Island, were deployed at wildfire incidents across the whole of Northern Ireland. This was the busiest period in the history of the NIFRS. In total NIFRS responded to over 3000 wildfire incidents at a cost of £8m.

1.5 Forest Service, Northern Ireland Water and the farming community were significantly impacted by these 2011 wildfires. Forest Service lost an estimated 700 HA of forestry plantation valued at approximately £1m. In the Silent Valley catchment and surrounding area of the Mourne a wildfire damaged between 8-10 square kilometres of upland heath which is estimated to have cost NI Water circa £230,000 because of deterioration in raw water quality leading to increased treatment costs. Over 5000 ha of farming agricultural land that was damaged required support payments.

1.6 These wildfires also damaged some of our most important nature conservation sites with an estimated 6,600 ha of land within designated sites was affected.

1.7 As a direct result of the 2011 wildfires an Interdepartmental Group was established in to develop recommendations to address the wildfire issue and a Northern Ireland Wildfire Stakeholder Group was subsequently established through which several recommended actions were delivered. Of particular note were: the Eastern Mourne Wildfire Project; the delivery of locally based wildfire community awareness and engagement initiatives such as in the Belfast Hills and the Ring of Gullion; international and national liaison with key wildfire partners; joint stakeholder response at wildfires; and the establishment of an informal wildfire risk alert system. However, the spate of wildfires has continued and more needs to be done.

1.8 The proposed strategic way forward will build upon this previous work and hopes to refocus and align efforts to enable Northern Ireland to be best placed to face the wildfire challenges that lie ahead. It has been developed through a co-design approach with a wide range of government Departments and agencies and land managers and environmental bodies. The focus of the co-design approach was to develop agreed Goals, Themes and Recommendations for Action as outlined in following sections.

## 2. Strategic Way Forward

2.1 The way forward is driven by 5 Strategic Goals:

- To reduce the numbers of wildfires.
- To lessen the impact of wildfires on the environment, society and the economy.
- To have a framework for partnership working and shared resources for wildfire prevention, strategic planning and interagency response.

- To build resilience into those landscapes and habitats most susceptible to wildfire and reduce the risk and/or severity of wildfires.
- To have communities that are aware and prepared for wildfire events.

2.2 Delivery of these Strategic Goals is based around 6 Strategic Themes:

- Governance
- Engagement
- Land Management
- Response
- Policy, Legislation and Enforcement
- Evidence

2.3 Addressing and delivering against these themes collectively and in combination are key to the delivery of this framework. Collective actions will help tackle the wildfire issue with different stakeholders bringing their own expertise and skills to one or more of the themes and its related activities.

### 3. Governance

3.1 The Strategic Way Forward will be governed by the following structures:

#### NI Strategic Wildfire Group

3.2 The main function of this group shall be to:

- Develop a Strategic Way Forward (and associated recommendations for action) for wildfires in NI.
- Oversee the Northern Ireland Wildfire Forum.
- Oversee the development of an action plan to implement the Strategic Way Forward.
- Report on the implementation of the Northern Ireland Strategic Way Forward and its recommendations for action.

- Periodically initiate a review of the Northern Ireland Strategic Way Forward taking into account feedback from the Wildfire Stakeholder Forum.

3.3 This group shall contain Departments, agencies and public bodies who have a critical role to play in delivering the strategic way forward. The group was established in March 2021.

### Northern Ireland Wildfire Stakeholder Forum

3.4 The Stakeholder Forum shall:

- have responsibility for developing, implementing, monitoring and reviewing Action Plans to deliver the Strategic Way Forward and associated Recommendations for Action; and
- oversee the work of local wildfire groups.

3.5 The Stakeholder Forum was established in January 2022.

### Local Wildfire Groups

3.6 Local Wildfire Groups have the responsibility for:

- undertaking operational wildfire work and initiatives in specific geographic areas.

3.7 These groups will in many cases be working directly on the ground with local landowners and managers. The membership of these groups may include members of the Stakeholder Group as well as locally based partners. Currently there are two local wildfire groups operating in Northern Ireland, the Belfast Hills and the Mourne wildfire groups.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- 1. Develop and implement a 5yr Strategic Action Plan that will deliver the Strategic Way forward.**

- 2. Strategic Wildfire Group to report annually on implementation of Strategic Action Plan.**
- 3. Strategic Wildfire Group undertake a 3yr review of the Strategic Way Forward and the Strategic Action Plan.**

### 4. Engagement

4.1 It is important to make people aware of the dangers of wildfires as well as to how their actions directly or indirectly create wildfires and what the consequences of these fires can be on the environment, society and the economy.

4.2 Rising awareness and education are an important aspect of the wildfire issue and an important part of the strategic way forward. A well-informed public will be more likely to use fire carefully and adhere to bye-laws, advice and legal restrictions / requirements and they can assist in the prevention and reporting of fires.

4.3 Engagement also means interacting with Academia and stakeholders in GB, Ireland and internationally to gain knowledge and to share best practise.

4.4 The only way to solve this problem is to work together.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- 4. Review the potential to develop of Firewise ® in communities in high-risk areas of Northern Ireland.**
- 5. Issue Wildfire Risk Alerts during periods of wildfire risk.**
- 6. Fire awareness and educational programmes developed and targeted at specific groups within the community.**

- 7. Development of a Landowner and Community Engagement communications programme.**
- 8. Establishment of Local Wildfire Groups.**
- 9. Develop International liaison / links with appropriate experts and organisations.**
- 10. Develop links with the GB and Irish Wildfire Forums / Stakeholder Groups.**

### 5. Land Management

5.1 The management of Northern Ireland landscapes is a key factor in managing the wildfire risk. In very simple terms this means managing the landscape and its vegetation through a variety of approaches to help reduce the risk of wildfire and the uncontrolled spread of wildfire across entire landscapes.

5.2 Many high-risk landscapes contain national and international conservations designations and are important for biodiversity and natural beauty (Areas of Special Scientific Interest, Special Area of Conservation, Special Protection Areas, and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty).

5.3 Across Europe one of the biggest contributors to the increased risk of wildfires are unmanaged landscapes leading to a situation where vegetation has continued to accumulate across the landscape.

5.4 It is important therefore that a balance is established to maintain conservation features and agricultural productivity whilst managing the landscape to help reduce and manage the wildfire risk.

5.5 To achieve this, it will be necessary to have appropriate policies in place regarding conservation management and agricultural management on these



landscapes and sites combined with wildfire management plans across those landscapes that are at risk of wildfire.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- 11. Development of Wildfire Management Plans and Response Plans for high-risk areas.**
- 12. Develop or advocate advice and guidance about wildfire management.**
- 13. Identify funding opportunities to support the management of wildfire risk in Northern Ireland.**
- 14. Consider methods to increase surveillance at high-risk locations during periods of high wildfire risk.**
- 15. Review availability of wildfire awareness and management training courses for landowners within NI.**

## 6. Response

6.1 These are the activities associated with responding to wildfire incidents but also the training and resources required in advance of responding to a wildfire incident. The primary organisation for delivery on this activity is the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS). As well as enhancing its own wildfire capabilities, other stakeholder organisations have developed the capacity to support NIFRS at wildfire incidents, the level of support ranges from the provision of additional and sometimes specialist wildfire fighting equipment, to provision of specialist subject matter advice to direct assistance during tactical burning operations.

6.2 This joint support during response together with the deployment and use of shared resources and skills should continue to be developed to provide a fully integrated and flexible multiagency response to wildfires across Northern Ireland.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

**16. Develop a National shared wildfire resource list for Northern Ireland.**

**17. Develop Interagency Response.**

**18. Review need for additional specialist equipment or support.**

**19. Develop Inter-Agency and Stakeholder Awareness Training**

## 7. Policy, Legislation and Enforcement

7.1 Policy, legislation and enforcement in the context of the Strategic Way Forward refers to activities that relate to the development or application of Government policy or legislation that has direct or indirect relevance to the control and management of wildfires in Northern Ireland such as those related to prescribed burning, burning of vegetation and arson.

7.2 It also includes wildfire investigation to take enforcement action (and to improve our understanding of why fires happen to inform future decision making).

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

**20. Undertake a review of associated wildfire land management, agricultural and environmental policies in NI and compare with other countries with comparable fire risk landscapes to inform future policy development.**

**21. Undertake a review of all existing legislation concerning burning of vegetation to assess adequacy of legislation governing wildfires and prescribed burning.**

**22. Develop Post Wildfire Investigation capability in NI.**

## 8. Evidence

8.1 Evidence should be transparent, robust and impartial. Such evidence sources are used to inform the development of policies and strategies, to support their implementation and to evaluate and measure outcomes. Evidence can also be used to help manage risks to society and the environment and help inform decision making.

8.2 Relevant evidence can include findings from existing research and development and monitoring and surveillance results, as well as from newly commissioned research and development where there are gaps in the knowledge/evidence base.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

**23. Identify NI research and evidence needs to inform prevention management**

**24. Development of centralised wildfire mapping and information database**

**25. Secure evidence to identify of high-risk areas and to support development of wildfire management / response plans.**

## 9. Consultation Questions

9.1 In relation to the Strategic Way Forward outlined:

- **Do you agree with the 5 Strategic Goals?**
- **Do you have any comments to make in relation to the 5 Strategic Goals?**
- **Do you agree with the 6 Strategic Themes?**
- **Do you have any comments to make in relation to the 6 Strategic Themes?**

- **Do you agree with the Recommendations for Action?**
- **Do you have any comments to make in relation to the Recommendations for Action?**

9.2 Please send any responses you have to [wildfireinfo@daera-ni.gov.uk](mailto:wildfireinfo@daera-ni.gov.uk)

By post to :

Colum McDaid  
Northern Ireland Environment Agency  
Natural Environment Division  
Klondyke Building  
Cromac Avenue  
Gasworks Business Park  
Malone Lower  
Belfast BT7 2JA

**By 5pm on Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> June 2023**

## 10. Next Steps

10.1 Following on from the outcome of this consultation, responses will be considered and the Strategic Way Forward will be finalised. An associated Action Plan to implement the Recommendations will be developed by the NI Wildfires Stakeholders Forum.

10.2 The Action Plan will then be implemented, monitored and reviewed on an ongoing basis by the NI Stakeholders Forum and the NI Strategic Wildfire Group.





For further information:

Natural Environment Division  
Klondyke Building  
Cromac Avenue  
Gasworks Business Park  
Malone Lower  
Belfast BT7 2JA

Colum McDaid  
Email: [wildfireinfo@daera-ni.gov.uk](mailto:wildfireinfo@daera-ni.gov.uk)