

Supporting guidance for Muirburn and Heather Cutting

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Fire is a management tool which has been used for centuries on heather moorland. It has the potential to maintain and rejuvenate heaths but it also has the potential for lasting damage if uncontrolled or used in the wrong situation.

Young heather shoots growing after fire are higher in protein and provide enhanced grazing for sheep, deer, red and black grouse. This item helps to create a mosaic of differing ages of heather to give a balance of good feeding, and shelter in the older, taller plants. Some long heather is always required for nesting birds. A heather burning or cutting rotation should always allow for areas of tall heather to remain.

Planning for muirburn or heather cutting

Good instruction on how to prepare your muirburn plan can be found in the [Muirburn Code supplement: Prescribed Burning on Moorland, A Guide to Best Practice](#). This also contains further sources of information.

Your muirburn / heather cutting plan should identify and protect the locations of vulnerable habitats such as blanket bog, and species such as adder, which require very structurally diverse habitats that could be lost through burning.

Burning should only be undertaken where heather (ling) or bell heather are the dominant species. Wet heaths dominated by cross-leaved heath and blanket bogs will not benefit from muirburn and in many cases muirburn would reduce the heather content and promote the more aggressive and less palatable purple moor-grass.

Correct identification of your habitats is the key to preparing a muirburn / heather cutting plan. The Muirburn Code identifies these habitats in detail and in particular the habitats which should not be burnt.

The main ones include:

- sites used by protected bird species or within half a mile of eagle nests
- woodland edges and scrub
- blanket and raised bogs where the heather constitutes less than 75 per cent cover
- exposed soil or peat
- steep hillsides and gullies where fire would be impossible to control

Preparing your muirburn plan will lead to a good understanding of the extent, age and condition of the heather on the holding. The basis of the plan will be a map showing:

- the areas which you plan to burn or cut and habitat type on these areas
- the areas which must not be burnt (fire free zones) or cut
- other useful information such as access routes, firebreaks, recent burning, water sources, contact details of neighbouring land managers, and the fire brigade

If burning is too frequent, with large fires or in inappropriate locations (such as peat bogs) it can damage the moorland habitat to the detriment of the agricultural and natural interests.

You can use a copy of muirburn / heather cutting map (or digital version) to record the annual burn or cut areas for your claim.

What needs to be done

Heather burning is controlled by a number of statutory restrictions which must be followed when undertaking the activity. The Scottish Government's Muirburn Code outlines these restrictions and along with its supplementary guidance provides guidance on how to carry out muirburn.

Heather cutting or swiping is not covered by the same legislation but as with burning should not be carried out between the 15 April and 1 October. Follow the principles outlined in the muirburn code for cutting too.

Avoid vehicle damage by using low ground pressure vehicles and avoid soft and wet areas.

Safe muirburn requires both experienced personnel and effective fire control equipment. A key principle of muirburn is never to light a fire unless you know how and where that fire will be extinguished.

Further information

Assessing the age of the oldest heather as described in the [Guide to Best Practice](#) will enable the length of rotation and the annual burning proposal.

For further information on reptile and amphibian habitat needs refer to the [ARC Reptile Management Handbook](#).