

Supporting guidance for Muirburn and Heather Cutting

Date published: 12 January, 2022

For recent changes to this guidance, please see the [bottom of the page](#).

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 situations or habitats.

Young heather shoots growing after fire are higher in protein and provide enhanced grazing for sheep, deer, red and black grouse. This capital item helps to create a mosaic of differing ages of heather to give a balance of good feeding, with shelter in older, taller heather. Some tall 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

You need to prepare a [muirburn or heather cutting plan](#) (PDF, Size: 108.0 kB)

Further information on preparing your plan can be found in the [Muirburn Code](#)

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.

Muirburn rotation, the length of time between burning the same location, should be a minimum of 10 years. Other factors need to be taken into account in determining the site specific rotation. The following factors will increase the rotation length; livestock and deer grazing, poor soils, condition of habitat, climatic conditions and elevation. The proposed rotation length should be detailed in the plan, as well as how this is determined.

Identifying where to burn and where not to burn is key in preparing a muirburn / heather cutting plan. The Muirburn Code requires this to be done by identifying protected areas and species, as well as sensitive areas.

Some of the areas which should not be burned are:

- areas of peat soils with a peat depth greater than 50cm deep
- areas of exposed soil or peat and shallow soils
- steep gradients including hillsides and gullies where fire would be difficult to control
- sites habitually used by protected bird and mammal species or within a kilometre of eagle nests
- areas of bracken
- areas of wind clipped vegetation
- areas adjacent to woodland, woodland edges and scrub
- areas adjacent to water bodies
- areas adjacent to Scheduled Monuments
- Areas which have had peatland restoration carried out (including via Peatland Action funding) should not be included for a period of 10 years after restoration

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 (previous muirburn plan maps), water sources, contact details of neighbouring land managers, and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

If burning is too frequent, or fires are large 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 paper or digital copy of your muirburn / heather cutting map to record the annual burn or cut areas for your claim.

What needs to be done?

There are a number of statutory restrictions which must be followed when undertaking muirburn. 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.

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

Safe muirburn requires both sufficient numbers of 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 heather and how to work out the appropriate length of rotation and the average area to burn. Guidance can be found in the [Muirburn Code](#).

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

Recent changes

Section	Change
Planning for Muirburn or heather cutting	Updated Muirburn Code and plan Area which should not be burned

Previous versions

[Previous versions of this page](#)