

Supporting guidance for Bracken Management

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

Note: Due to the decision by the manufacturers of Asulam to cease further work on a permanent solution to authorise the product in the UK, the chemical is no longer available to treat bracken. For all new contracts, therefore, mechanised and manual treatment of bracken are the only capital items that can be funded.

Introduction

Bracken is a native plant with conservation benefits and is a natural component of many woodlands and open-ground habitats. Stands of bracken can provide a valuable habitat for wildlife, especially where the bracken canopy is relatively open.

However, bracken is a successful coloniser and can spread into grassland, moorland and heathland. When bracken encroaches onto sensitive habitats, work to manage its spread may be required.

Why control bracken?

This option aims to prevent the loss of heathland, moorland and grassland of conservation value, and to restore, enhance or maintain their open nature. Restoring a more open structure to the existing vegetation will encourage characteristic native plants to thrive and provide breeding and feeding grounds for associated wildlife. Priority species that may benefit include juniper, pearl-bordered fritillary, northern brown argus, slender scotch burnet, black grouse and skylark.

How best to control bracken on your land

When considering bracken control, you need to think carefully about why you are doing it and what you would like to achieve. Consider whether control is required.. Identify any sensitive areas and non-target species that might be adversely affected by bracken management.

Bracken is a native plant, and you will not always want to control it; sometimes you will want to maintain a patchy cover to benefit species associated with bracken. If you decide to take no action, monitor the spread of bracken.

Your control programme should consist of an initial treatment and repeated follow-up treatments. **This applies to manual and mechanised bracken treatment.** Control measures can include manual (hand cutting, hand pulling) or mechanical (cutting/rolling/crushing), as well as the use of livestock.

Where you have already claimed primary treatment and follow up bracken treatment through AECS, you can only include follow up treatment over a much reduced area in any new application and no more than two follow up treatments can be included.

A control programme should cover a five-year period and several different control measures might be required. You need to consider the slope and accessibility of the site when choosing a control treatment. The use of ground vehicles will not be appropriate in some areas due to steep slopes and difficult access.

Cutting

If you have opted for Primary treatment of bracken – manual, then you should cut bracken at least twice in the first year (in May / June and again in July / August) as the fronds start to unfurl. More frequent cuts than this are beneficial in the early years, to prevent the plant photosynthesising. This results in the plant taking energy from the root system, weakening it over time.

Claim the total hectareage of bracken you plan to treat. So, for example, if you have a 10ha field with 5ha of bracken, then claim 5ha in year one (you don't claim for each cut).

This capital item also covers any follow up treatment and you will need to cut at least twice every year for the next five years, for control to be effective. Further detail on how to claim this is below.

Rolling

Rolling crushes young bracken fronds that emerge in the spring and weakens the plant by bruising the stems and causing them to bleed. Rolling should be carried out again later on in summer, and should be repeated over a number of years to be effective.

Where stands are particularly dense and vigorous, you may need to cut / flail / roll three times per year. Where ground-nesting birds are present, mechanical control should be avoided during May–July.

Grazing

After primary treatment, livestock can be used to help break up the bracken litter and expose the underground rhizomes to frost damage through poaching. Livestock grazing can be used as part of a non-chemical control strategy, complementing cutting or rolling over spring / summer.

Pigs have been used as bracken grazers successfully in the past, with results showing that they specifically target bracken over other species, uprooting the rhizomes which are then desiccated and die.

Concentrated cattle grazing for intense periods may also be beneficial. Placing feed licks within bracken areas and moving them regularly will encourage cattle to move through bracken stands and crush them. Some land managers are trialling virtual collars to facilitate this management.

There is a risk of bracken poisoning and proliferation of ticks in bracken stands can adversely affect animal welfare so you need to check animals regularly. You will also need to be careful that livestock grazing does not lead to soil erosion.

Hand pulling

Hand pulling is rarely used as part of a bracken control strategy, because it is labour intensive. Nevertheless, hand pulling can be an effective control strategy for smaller patches of bracken and should not be completely discounted.

Follow up treatment

You must apply for follow-up treatment as part of your application.

For manual treatment, you must estimate the area you think will require follow-up treatment, however, you must only claim for the actual area you treat in subsequent years.

The Primary Treatment of Bracken - manual capital item covers primary treatment and any follow up. This item can be claimed annually.

Estimate the area you think will require follow up each year. You may need to treat a similar area in the first three years, with the claim area reducing in years four and five. When it comes to submitting a claim for follow up treatment, you must only claim the area that was treated on the ground.

Follow up treatment of bracken for mechanised methods

Claim the same hectareage as you did for Primary Treatment, as the payment rate is reduced for follow-up, however, you can only claim follow up a maximum of twice during the five years of the contract.

If you opt for entirely mechanised control, you will have to undertake annual mechanised follow up. However, you can only claim the follow up payment twice over the five years. The rate is such, that two follow up claims are likely to cover the costs of mechanised control.

How to plan the work

Describe your programme of treatment and follow-up actions (where applicable) in a bracken management plan.

You must submit a completed Bracken Control Plan following the template below.



Bracken Control Plan (MS Word, Size: 127.9 kB)

doc_external_url: <https://www.ruralpaymentsandservices.org/media/resources/AECS-2024---Bracken-Control-Plan-template-updated---7-Nov-2023.docx> [Plan template]

Your plan should include a 1:10,000 map (or 1:2,500) and describe the following:

- the habitat(s) of conservation value which will benefit from bracken management – stated in hectares and shown on your map
- the area of bracken to be actively managed – stated in hectares and shown on your map. Note that stands of dense bracken, classed as ineligible for the Basic Payment Scheme, can be treated, but the Agri-Environment Climate Scheme will not fund this treatment as it is classed as non-agricultural land. Therefore, please ensure you do not claim for these areas
- the extent of bracken – stated in hectares and shown on your map
- the density of the bracken cover – see descriptions in published guidance (see [Further information](#) section)
- the type of management you propose across the area (control or no action) and the treatments you propose to use to achieve this, including any follow-up action. You should choose an appropriate method of control in accordance with published guidance
- where you propose to control bracken you should describe the type of vegetation you expect will replace it
- any sensitive areas where there should be no mechanised bracken control should be shown on your map (e.g. archaeological sites)
- how you propose to monitor the success of your control work

Your plan should identify the locations of sensitive areas and appropriate buffer zones, including the following:

- where plant or animal species of conservation value are present and are likely to be damaged by the control method, e.g. ferns damaged by spraying, or nesting birds damaged by mechanical control
- gullies or steep slopes where regeneration of more desirable vegetation will be difficult or impossible to achieve and soil erosion may result
- where there is a well-developed woodland flora, e.g. bluebells, under the bracken canopy
- archaeological features which might be damaged by mechanical control

Further information

- [UK Best Practice Guidance – Bracken Management 2024](#)
- [Muirburn code](#)

Recent changes

Section	Change
Note	Edits to cater for changes relating to treatment of bracken capital item
Introduction	Final sentence amended to read “When bracken encroaches onto sensitive habitats, work to manage its spread may be required”.
How best to control bracken on your land	Edits to text within this section. Added text to ‘Grazing (formerly Over winter grazing)’ sub section. Sub sections relating to Herbicide application, Aerial spraying, Do you require consent, After the initial work have been removed.
Follow-up treatment	Sub Section heading - Follow up treatment of bracken for mechanised or chemical methods has been amended to Follow up treatment of bracken for mechanised methods. Middle two paragraphs of sub section have been removed.
How to plan the work	Updated Bracken control template . Edits to text

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