COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE: MOORLAND BURNING

WESTMINSTER HALL DEBATE, OLIVIA BLAKE MP
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Background:

- The statutory Code of Practice for heather burning, The Heather and Grass Burning Code (Defra, 2007), was developed in association with key stakeholders acknowledges that *"Fire has been used by land managers for many thousands of years. When used with skill and understanding, it can benefit agriculture, game birds and wildlife."* The Code states that burning can only take place during the 'burning season' which runs from 1 October – 15 April in upland areas (severely disadvantaged areas), when the roots are at their wettest to avoid a hot burn that can otherwise enter the peat. In order to burn in environmentally protected areas, such as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), consent is required from Natural England, and there are strict limits on the amount of heather than can be burned at any one time. More than 70 per cent of English grouse moors are designated as SSSI. A licence is also required to burn in sensitive locations such as on a slope or near a watercourse.

- Rotational heather burning, otherwise known as 'muirburn', on areas of shallow peat and dry heath is undertaken to increase the diversity of heather age and structure. Burning takes place in small patches, the frequency of which depends on the speed at which heather grows in a particular area and becomes dominant. This ensures that there is a mixture of older heather for protection and nesting, younger heather for feeding, and a fresh burn where regrowth is just starting. It also encourages the growth of peat forming sphagnum moss which filters and absorbs water. The aim is to create lots of micro habitats so that within one acre of moorland the widest possible range of biodiversity, from insects to reptiles, and mammals to birds, have the full range of habitats they require. A low intensity 'cool burn' in small patches removes the canopy but prevents the burning of peat or moss beneath the vegetation, avoiding the resultant loss of carbon and delay in regrowth of the heather. Although the cutting of heather may be a viable alternative to burning in some areas, this is not the case everywhere, and its possible impacts are still to be determined. An independent review of all the available science is required before it can be put forward as a sustainable aternative.

- Controlled, rotational burning can also help reduce the risk of damaging wildfires and the carbon loss caused by these. Large stands of rank and woody heather pose a major fire risk due to a significant build-up of fuel loads. Uncontrolled wildfires cause considerable environmental damage as they burn with greater intensity burn the peat beneath the vegetation, and prevent the peatland storing water and carbon. This view is supported by research into Heather Burning by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust.

The 2018 wildfire on Saddleworth Moor, which was followed by a further serious wildfire in February 2019, took 10 days to bring under control, involving fire fighters from seven counties to fight the blaze, assisted by gamekeepers, wardens from the Peak District National Park, National Trust and RSPB, as well soldiers, farmers and other volunteers. Those gamekeepers, who came from nine shooting estates from across the Peak District, were able to provide much-needed experience and specialist fighting equipment. Some 4 square miles of moorland were destroyed, and the environmental damage

was considerable. The moor had a no-burn policy. The 2019 wildfire of Scotland's Flow Country, as a result of the moorland becoming overgrown, also resulted in over 22 square miles of this UNESCO world heritage site being severely damaged, with 700,000 tonnes of CO2 equivalent released into the atmosphere, doubling the country's greenhouse gas emissions for the six days it burned.

Peatland Protection – The Science: Four Key reports

- The debate over the use of controlled heather burning as a key element of moorland management continues to be polarised, with opposition to the long-established practice often citing science that is now nearly a decade old.

- A review of research from 2013 - 2020 carried out by respected scientists has now found that the conclusions of the previous science are out of date and cannot be regarded as a safe basis for policy decision-making today. This is particularly important given that the Government is currently developing a strategy for peatland.

- The Uplands Partnership, which compromises leading countryside organisations, including the Countryside Alliance, has produced Peatland Protection: The Science, four key reports, which collates the latest scientific findings. This dossier is highly significant in that it strongly recommends that any policy discussions should take cognisance of the latest research. In summary the findings indicate that:

    - Heather burning can have a positive effect on carbon capture.

    - Burning does not cause water discolouration.

    - Environmentally important Sphagnum moss recovers quickly from low severity 'cool' burning.

    - The loss of controlled burning in the USA led to declines in bird life and an increase in damaging wildfires.

    - Greenhouse gas emissions from controlled burning are relatively insignificant compared to emissions from wildfire, or indeed severely degraded lowland peatlands used for agriculture.

Countryside Alliance Position

- Conclusions from previous science are now out of date and not safe to be used in policy-making.

- A more coherent policy framework is required, which would include integrated adaptive trial designs, and monitoring the impacts of different types of management, to provide more robust evidence.

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