

12.3 Regeneration of heather

Well-managed heather is a tremendous asset to the farm, providing a valuable grazing resource for both sheep and cattle. In addition, heather forms a distinctive component of the landscape and it is an important wildlife habitat.

Funding is available for burning or flailing blocks (approximately 0.5 hectares) of heather moorland in a planned sequence to encourage regeneration. The aim is to produce a patchwork with range of heather ages, which increases grazing quality, encourage livestock to graze the whole area and benefit wildlife. A heather regeneration plan must be agreed with DARD, outlining the extent and location of the areas to be burnt or flailed before approval can be given.

Conditions and standards

Heather burning

- Burning of heather or hill pasture is controlled by law and must not be carried out between *15 April and 31 August* to protect ground-nesting birds.
- Burning heather is a skilled job requiring careful supervision and sufficient labour to keep the fire under control.
- **Burning must not be carried on** blanket bog, bracken, woodland and scrub including gorse, archaeological and historic sites, heather over 30cm tall and Areas of Special Scientific Interest without the written consent of Environment and Heritage Service, DOE.
- **Give notice of burning** - You must, by law, give notice of intent to burn to neighbours, owners or occupiers of adjacent land at least 24 hours before burning. If the burn is to take place within one mile of a State owned forest, permission must be obtained from the local District Forest Officer.
- **Suitable conditions for burning** - burning must only take place in suitable weather conditions, which occur, on average, on only ten days each year. Light winds are often variable in strength and direction, which make control of the burn difficult. Always aim to burn when the breeze is blowing downhill if possible.
- Fires should be kept to around 30 metres wide and not allowed to spread to greater than 50 metres in width and can be as long as is practical. A normal burning team should consist of at least 5-6 people. It is a legal requirement to have sufficient people on hand to control a burn. A realistic target would be five burns per day each covering 0.4 - 0.8 ha (1 -2 acres).

- **Firebreaks must be present** - these can either be natural features such as gullies, wet strips or flushes, farm tracks or rock outcrops. If no natural firebreaks exist artificial ones must be created. All firebreaks must cut across the line of the proposed fire. Firebreaks should be at least 6 metres and preferably 10 metres wide.
- It is essential to create 10 metre wide firebreaks around any areas of commercial forestry. These should be maintained annually by one of the following methods:
 - **By burning:** a fire burned against the wind so that it burns hot and slow can be used to create a firebreak.
 - **By flailing:** if a tractor-powered flail can gain access to the area a firebreak can be cut in the heather and the burn completed before the cut material dries out.
- **Safety when burning** - each member of the burning squad should have a face mask (BS2092) and a long handled beater. The latter should be 3-4 metres long and are best constructed from aluminium with either a flat rectangular aluminium end or a rectangle of reinforced rubber conveyor belting.
- It is essential that all fires be properly extinguished before leaving the site.

Flailing heather

- Heather flailing must not be carried out during the period 15 April to 31 August to protect ground-nesting birds.
- Flailing heather by mechanical means is an acceptable way of encouraging regeneration. Suitable machines range from a specifically designed heather swipe to old single or double chop forage harvesters.
- The technique is simple - the same planning approach as outlined for heather burning must be followed. Leave the side of the block as irregular as possible to give a more natural appearance. A layer of mulch may suppress heather regeneration and, if possible, try to spread off the cut area or place into rows.

Further advice

Burning is the most widely used method of regenerating heather. The method:

- Encourages new growth to sprout from existing heather plants,
- Removes old, dead material, recycles nutrients,
- Stimulates heather seed germination.

Future management after burning

If the burn has been carried out properly heather stems will regenerate both from the plant base and the underlying seed bank. These young tender shoots will invariably attract sheep and, if overgrazing results, the heather may be grazed out. This can be avoided if the burning programme is spread around the whole moor in small blocks rather than concentrating it in one large block. If the block of regenerated heather is at a risk from overgrazing some form of temporary fencing, for example, electric fencing, should be considered.

Flailing has the following advantages when compared with burning:

- Less weather dependent,
- Requires less labour and is easier to control,
- Can be used on old woody heather,
- No risk of fires getting out of control,
- Useful for creating firebreaks.

The disadvantages include:

- Rate of regeneration is slower than with burning,
- Operational area is limited by terrain,
- Health and safety needs considered,
- Equipment is more expensive.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs)

Note: Consent must be obtained from the Environment & Heritage Service (EHS), Department of the Environment before any works are carried out within or along an ASSI boundary. The EHS contact telephone number for further information is 028 9054 6595.

Management plans are provided for participants in the Environmentally Sensitive Areas and Countryside Management Schemes

