

Introduction

Following the large wildfire located in the area of Knockando, Aberlour three separate debrief processes have been carried out. These debriefs have focussed on the following groups:

- Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
- Grampian Local Resilience Partnership
- Other agencies that responded to or were affected by the wildfire.

Relevant information gathered from the three debrief reports has been consolidated into this single report and has been split into the following sections:

- What went well
- Areas that can be improved

An action plan will now be developed to ensure that the areas that can be improved which have been highlighted are explored in more detail and improvements made so that future response to wildfire incidents benefit from the learning that has come from this large incident.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is extremely grateful to everyone who responded to the incident and the invaluable support they provided to the operation. We are equally as thankful for the feedback that has been provided through the series of debriefs which will benefit future responses.

Incident Details

A large Wildfire that required SFRS involvement for a 4 day period. The incident started at Paul's Hill Wind Farm, at Kirdellbeg by Knockando, Aberlour, AB387SF and moved North / North West onto the Berrybane Wind farm and the Altyre Estate. The incident developed 4 distinct fire fronts requiring geographical sectorisation. Estimated burn area in excess of 5000 hectares. SFRS used a high number of pumping appliances along with specialist wildfire assets, supported by Community Response Units with Wildfire capability. The incident was well supported by 3rd party agencies, mainly in the form of estate and forestry workers who utilised numerous all-terrain vehicles and specialist wildfire equipment. Helicopters were also utilised once available to provide water bombing capability, and under the control of wildfire Tactical Advisors, back burns were undertaken to control and extinguish one fire front.

What went well

Partnership Working

The collaborative approach to dealing with the incident using estate workers, wind farm employees, Police and Helicopter crews was excellent.

The multi-agency working through the Resilience Partnership was effective using tried and tested procedures.

Helicopter support was invaluable when it was available.

Resources

It was felt that the resourcing of the incident in Moray had been positive with good rotation of crews ensuring that the incident was constantly resourced.

The speed of deployment was good with appliances, including welfare facilities, arriving on scene quickly.

The SFRS Wildfire Tactical Advisor provided excellent information and advice.

Use of the Police Helicopter in assessing the scale of the fire was also a welcome resource.

Additionally, it was recognised that the community response had been excellent through the provision of local knowledge and support in tackling the fire. Engagement with the windfarm companies had been very good and use of the windfarm tracks and facilities had been beneficial to the firefighting response.

Resilience Partnership Meetings

Once established the RP teleconference meetings were well chaired with good participation from partner agencies.

Incident Command

Incident structure was appropriate and well managed.

Communications

The use of a dedicated Airwave channel on the San-C units to support communications strategy was an excellent idea to overcome the communications challenges being experienced.

General Effort

Positive attitude of personnel – crews worked for extended durations in challenging circumstances carrying out arduous work over a number of days.

What Can be Improved

Command Control & Coordination

The sheer size of the fire meant that it wasn't possible for the SFRS to impose an inner cordon, meaning that it was difficult to control the incident area.

Many Estate/farm workers were self-deploying onto the hill to fight the fire and this was a major concern for SFRS who are responsible for the safety of individuals within the inner cordon.

Appliances and Officers attending the incident should be provided with clear and accurate directions for the location of the Command Unit and any Rendezvous Points.

The incident structure could have benefited from a re-structure as the incident developed and grew to better meet the needs of the incident.

The Incident Support Room at Dundee Operations Control was utilised to good effect, however a better understanding of when this facility should be used would be of benefit.

The rest periods and welfare for Crews and Flexi Duty Officers proved problematic at times.

Communications

Communications were challenging at this large-scale incident. Mobile phone signals were often not available. Estate radios or SFRS radios could help, however as this incident was so large, the range of the radios was not sufficient.

The LRP felt that the public communications messaging and coordination could have been improved upon. The view was that it was a long time before public messaging was agreed and disseminated and that greater use could have been made of social media. It was considered that the Public communications Group should have activated earlier and have potentially been led by another agency on behalf of the partnership and thereby reducing the workload on the SFRS. The SFRS did feel that they could have provided greater support internally to their dedicated media resource for the response.

Use of Helicopters and Drones

There is no formal protocol for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to access helicopters outside of the current process using land owner's insurance.

The use of drones that are registered on the Community Asset Register and the potential benefits they can bring to the incident is not well understood.

Fire Plans and access to water supplies

Water planning was not as effective as it could have been. Those estates which have fire plans should have this detail included in them.

The helicopter companies advised that it would be good to know where water locations are and explained their requirements for water supplies. There is a need to know if they can access rivers or lochs, and that historically some difficulties around permission to use water had been experienced.

Joint Training

It was noted that there hadn't been the same amount of joint training with SFRS and estates as in previous years.

Monitoring of Fire - Hand Back to Estate Owner or Occupier

There was a lack of understanding about when the incident would be handed back to the estate owner/manager from the SFRS.

Equipment

There was a feeling that the fire beaters used by SFRS are not as effective other on the market and further research should be undertaken.

The SFRS was unable to provide adequate specialist wildfire vehicles to support the incident in terms of firefighting and personnel transportation.

Vehicles provided to FDMs to attend off road wildfire RVPs are not suitable

Participating Agencies

Aberdeen City Council
Ballindalloch Estate
Cawdor Forestry
Cairngorms National Parks Authority
Dunmaglass Estate
Forestry & Land Scotland
Knockando Estate
Logie Estate
Moray Council
Natural Power Consultants
Natural Power Ltd
PDG Helicopters
Police Scotland
RAF
SEPA
Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Scottish Government
Scottish Natural Heritage
Scottish & Southern Energy Networks
Skyhook Helicopters
Statkraft Energy Ltd
Tilhill Forestry