

**Briefing for Moorland Forum**  
**September Muirburn – a collaborative investigation**  
**(SNH Project 13911)**

**Background**

The Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (2011) brought changes to the legislation governing muirburn in Scotland, including a provision allowing the Minister to alter the dates of the muirburn season (currently 1st October to 30th April). Some land managers view extending the season to allow burning in part or all of September as a way of making available more burning days. The current evidence base regarding the positive and negative impacts of such an extension is scant.

Several strands of evidence may inform a decision about altering the dates of the muirburn season. These include information from other jurisdictions where September burning is permitted (placed in the specific environmental context of Scotland); analysis of existing information on the relationship between the timing of life-cycle events (e.g. dormancy, seed production and dispersal of plant species; breeding, dispersal and dormancy of mammals, birds, reptiles and invertebrates) with September burning; and direct examination of the effects of September burning. This project contributes to the last of these strands. Alone it cannot produce an adequate evidence base.

**The project**

The WANE Act allows muirburn under licence outwith the current muirburn season, for specific purposes including research. This project uses this licensing provision to gather data on the effectiveness and risks associated with September muirburn. The overall aim is to provide information on fire effects and vegetation recovery from September fires, allowing this to be compared with existing knowledge in relation to in-season fires.

The project involves land managers who have kindly agreed to participate in the project. They burn areas according to their normal muirburn practice, but in September under licence. Prior to burning, monitoring plots are set up and assessed, usually by contractors appointed and funded by SNH, and these are assessed again within one month of burning, one year later, and again three or four years after the burn. Final monitoring is expected to take place in October 2016.

**Progress**

Trial plots were established in 2012 on 8 sites from the borders to the Orkney Islands. However, the inclement September weather that year meant that only three sites managed all or part of the burning. In 2013, further burning was carried out on these and three additional sites. Geographically there is an eastern bias, with three sites in Perth and Kinross, one on Deeside, one in Inverness-shire and one in Orkney. Four are managed principally as grouse moors, and two are managed for conservation by an NGO.

It is of course too early to comment on the results of the trials, as some plots are only at the one-year post-burn stage, results have not all been processed, and thus no analysis carried out. However, some observations can be made, subject of course to confirmation. Perhaps the first thing to note is that weather conditions are not always suitable for burning in September. Five out of eight sites did not manage to burn at all in September 2012, and two out of eight didn't manage to burn in either 2012 or 2013. At the other end of the scale, there is a cautionary note to be struck about the condition of vegetation when it is dry enough to burn in September. In one site burnt in 2012, control of a fire was lost, and in one burnt in 2013 there were difficulties in maintaining control and ensuring smouldering moss was extinguished. The amount of vegetation consumed by fires varies across sites, as does the cover and type of regeneration following fire, but analysis of final data will be required to draw out any meaningful and reliable results