Strengthening Scotland's preparedness for wildfire



A statement from Stuart Stevens KFSM, Chief Officer of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

Recent wildfires across the UK and around the world have once again demonstrated the unprecedented scale, complexity and danger that these events present.

Within Scotland the recent wildfires, including the significant incident in the Cairngorms, has demonstrated something else: the strength and bravery of Scotland's communities, the professionalism of our emergency services, and the value of partnership working when the country faces serious risks.

I want to place on record my sincere thanks to the communities in and around Aviemore, and to those from further afield, who provided such generous support to our crews and partners during the recent incident. The kindness shown to responders, particularly in relation to their welfare, is deeply appreciated, and I am eternally grateful for your support.

Without question the impact of this fire has been significant on the local community, economy and environment. However, the bravery and effort of all who responded prevented the loss of life, homes or infrastructure.

I want to recognise the exceptional commitment of SFRS Firefighters, Officers, Operations Control staff and Support staff who responded from across Scotland in demanding and arduous conditions. Tackling the Cairngorms wildfire required a significant partnership response involving public, private and third sector organisations, land managers, local communities and national agencies. I want to pay tribute to all those who supported this response and sincerely thank you all. That collective effort demonstrated the very best of Scotland's resilience arrangements. It also reinforced why effective command, coordination and safety structures are essential at incidents of this scale.

Many of those involved came from our On-Call stations. These colleagues often balance their SFRS role with other employment, family responsibilities and community commitments. Their contribution to Scotland is vital, the role they play in their local communities is invaluable, and I do not underestimate the personal sacrifices they made in responding to this incident, and I am indebted to them.

It is evident to me that there is much to learn from the Cairngorms incident, and to ensure we truly capture this learning we must approach this in an open, inclusive and transparent manner. To this end I have commissioned a number of formal debrief processes, including an independently facilitated process, to ensure that all partners, agencies and community representatives can have their voices heard.

Wildfires are dynamic, weather driven, unpredictable and dangerous. Conditions can change rapidly. Fire can spread across large areas of land, affect communities, threaten infrastructure, damage wildlife and natural habitats, and place considerable demand on emergency services and local partners.

As a national fire and rescue service, SFRS is proud of the role it plays in protecting communities across Scotland. During recent incidents, our national model allowed us to deploy personnel, specialist resources and operational support from across the country while continuing to respond to other significant emergencies.

That ability to provide equitable access to capability, wherever risk emerges, is one of the great strengths of a national Service.

But pride in the response must not prevent us from recognising the scale of the challenge ahead.

Wildfire is an increasing and changing risk. The pattern, duration and intensity of these incidents is evolving. It is no longer enough to view wildfire primarily as an incident to be managed once it has started. We must increasingly view it as a national resilience issue requiring prevention, preparedness, investment and shared responsibility.

SFRS is already strengthening its own wildfire capability. Through our Wildfire Strategy and wider Service Delivery Review, we are continuing to develop the skills, equipment, specialist advice and operational arrangements required to respond safely and effectively. This includes strategically located wildfire resources, specialist equipment, tactical advisers and enhanced support for crews operating in rural and remote environments. But more needs to be done. Alongside strategic change the Service requires sustained investment to ensure we are ready to meet this ever-increasing threat.

However, response alone cannot be the answer.

If Scotland is serious about reducing the risk and impact of wildfire, prevention must sit at the heart of our national approach. That means reducing the likelihood of fires starting. It means limiting the conditions that allow fires to spread quickly. It means improving access, water supplies, early identification, public awareness, land management plans, local preparedness and the ability of communities and partners to act before conditions become critical.

It also means recognising that wildfire prevention cannot rest with one organisation alone.

Through the Scottish Wildfire Forum SFRS will continue to work with the Scottish Government, local authorities, land managers, public bodies, businesses, communities and resilience partners to consider what more can be done now. But we need a broader national conversation about how Scotland manages this risk in the years ahead.

Given the risk to life, property, infrastructure and the natural environment, I believe Scotland should now consider a more formal and proportionate fire safety regime for wildfire prevention and preparedness — one that reflects the seriousness of the risk we collectively face. The built environment has long been subject to clear expectations around fire safety. As wildfire risk grows, we must ask whether our approach to the natural and rural environment is sufficiently clear, consistent and preventative.

That does not mean creating unnecessary burden or division. It means setting clear expectations, improving planning, supporting land managers and communities, and ensuring that prevention is treated as a shared priority.

Preparedness is not about alarm. It is about responsibility.

It is about recognising that the climate, landscape and risk environment are changing. It is about learning from recent incidents. It is about investing before the emergency rather than counting the cost afterwards. And it is about ensuring that Scotland's emergency services, communities and partners are supported to meet the risks we can reasonably foresee.

The recent wildfire response should give Scotland confidence. It demonstrated courage, professionalism, partnership and public spirit. But it should also prompt action.

We now have an opportunity to further strengthen how Scotland prevents, prepares for and responds to wildfire. That opportunity must not be missed.

The time to fight the risk of wildfire is before the smoke is in the air. The decisions we take today will determine how well-prepared Scotland is tomorrow.

SFRS will continue to play its full part. We will continue to strengthen our capability, work alongside partners and support communities across the country. However, reducing the impact of wildfire in Scotland cannot be achieved by the fire and rescue service alone.

It will require a shared national commitment from government, public services, land managers, businesses, communities and individuals alike. If we are serious about protecting lives, livelihoods, infrastructure, our natural environment and the resilience of our nation, we must act now — together, with purpose, and with a long-term commitment to prevention, as well as response.



Stuart Stevens KFSM
Chief Officer of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

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