**From:** Noel Bugler
**Sent:** Tuesday 25 June 2019 11:56
**To:** Robert Edge <Robert.Edge@chg.gov.ie>
**Cc:** Padraig O'Donnell <Padraig.O'Donnell@chg.gov.ie>
**Subject:** FW: Fire Resilience Meeting

Robert,

Thanks for that comprehensive and concise report.

To note - NPWS absolutely do not have a prohibition on firebreaks as stated by the IFA rep. Any firebreak or 'choke point' can be applied for within the Slieve Blooms Designated area and Appropriately Assessed. It is unlikely the mechanically excavated one that was done by Coillte at the location in SAC/SPA Baunreagh/Bordowin could ever be allowed but grazed or mechanically cut firebreaks are certainly on the table and this was clearly made known to the HH team at a meeting previously.

A very interesting tone from Coillte and IFA from your report.

Noel

**From:** Robert Edge
**Sent:** 24 June 2019 14:10
**To:** Noel Bugler
**Subject:** Fire Resilience Meeting

Hi Noel,

Please find my notes from Friday.  I’ve kept it as succinct as possible.  Any comments are welcome,

Rob

**Venue:** Mourne Heritage Trust Offices

**Date:** 21st June, 2019

**Meeting Commenced with a talk delivered by Randy McCormack – Northern Ireland Fire Service.**

The following are the main points from Randy’s talk:

* Eastern Mournes Fire Resilience Project is a result of major wild fires in 2011:
	+ In 6 weeks the Fire Service dealt with over 3,000 fires.
	+ 10,500 hectares of land burnt during that period.
	+ 6,500 of the area burnt was designated for ecological reasons.
	+ The fires cost £9m.
	+ It cost Northern Water £250,000 to treat the water after the fires due to soot, carbon etc being washed in the reservoirs.
	+ Given the scale and cost of the wildfires there was at that point a political imperative to address the issue.
* Fire Resilience Plan is based on:
	+ Prevention – manage critical points;
	+ Collaboration between stakeholders;
	+ Protection of key resources; and
	+ Response – Fire Service plus others.
* Managing critical points gives responders time and allows for focused response to wild fires.
* Recognition of the fact the NI Fire Service did not have the skills to deal with wild fires – no tactical knowledge of dealing with wild fires.
	+ FS personnel were trained up and experts from Catalonia in Spain were called upon to assist the Fire Service.
	+ A trained wild fire officer is a necessity as well as a Tactical Officer with the skills to guide Fire Service responders during a wild fire – make tactical decisions during the fires.
* The Fire Service work with and consult with the Mourne Heritage Trust during fires and acknowledge the need to respect the environment.
* The resources of the Fire Service are limited so they need the inputs of the Mourne Heritage Trust.

**At this point some questions were put to the northern delegates:**

**Ancillary resources for fighting fires**

PM – Do Mourne Heritage Trust get involved in fighting fires?

MB – They have 10 staff plus various vehicles including Argos, quad, off road vehicles, trailers, water bowsers etc. These people are trained and will get involved in fighting fires.

PM – Coillte have 4-5 contractors and staff in the Slieve Bloom, but they don’t have the skills to tackle fires.

RM – When wild fires occur, the Dept of the Environment NI is called upon to help the Fire Service. This is not just in terms of people and equipment but to help the Fire Service with identify priority areas for conservation to protect.

**Land ownership & Management**

GG – Asked who owns the land?

MB – NI Water, National Trust, Trustee Groups/Commonage.

IFA – Is there under grazing of the hill?

MB -Landuse change is a big issue, sheep are allowed on the land however a decision to ban cattle was implemented because of an outbreak of crypto some years ago. In 2012 NI Water issued a contract for grazing. This has been contentious as the grazing was not acquired by a local. The recovery of burnt areas by controlled grazing is part of the suite of management tools.

IFA – What is the management tool for this landscape?

CM – Grazing is a part of the solution, however hefting has been an issue as unhefted flocks simply gather at the roadside and at gateways.

FM – There are constraints on grazing in the Slieve Blooms such as fencing, water availability etc. However it can be used to address fire risk and reducing fuel loading.

MB – Grazing is important particularly after burning.

IFA – Any agri environmental schemes?

MB – There are group schemes.

**Resources and Equipment**

RM – Dept has secured funding of £180,000 for equipment including Argo, trailers, water tanks etc for fire control/management as well as training for staff. These are shared assets amongst the key stakeholders.

CE – Outlined Coillte Teo is a major landowner in the Slieve Blooms. They had 160 people on site during the fire last year. They recognise they can’t just throw resources at this issue. Asked how do they deal with so many designated areas? What is practical for prevention?

RM – Used Spanish consultants to map the Mournes and along with data on previous fires, prevailing weather conditions a computer model was developed to identify critical areas for management and critical areas to tackle ongoing fires.

CE – Coillte bought an Argo.

**Firebreaks**

IFA – Do you recommend fire breaks?

RM – We put in control areas rather than breaks.

IFA – NPWS don’t allow firebreaks.

CE – Does it matter if the Mounes burn?

MB – Yes, there are sensitive ecological areas as well as high numbers of visitors etc

IFA – Asked how much land NPWS own.

RE – Stated the Nature Reserve , owned by the state, extends to 2,300 ha.

IFA – Why did grazing cease on the reserve?

RE – At the time of the purchase in the 80s, grazing was minimal and when the state purchased the land, I believe they purchased the grazing rights also.

IFA – Why won’t the NPWS allow grazing?

RE – This can form part of the conversation.

CE – This is the conversation.

RE – This is a journey and we will have many conversations along that journey.

**Second Presentation given by Colum McDaid**

Colum is a Senior Official with the Environment Agency, part of the Department of Agriculture and Environment NI.

Colum outlined how the responsibility for driving this forward was put on his desk. He has since undertaken a fire fighting course, Advanced wild fire course in Northumbria as well as a tactical fire fighting course in Catalonia.

Key to his role were the following:

* Establish an understanding of how the fires in 2011 started.
* Implement cost effective land management.
* Review Fire Service methods.
* Identify areas or parcels of land where management is required.
* Establish wild fire groups
	+ Farming, community groups, public representatives etc

A key point raised by Colum is the establishment of ‘choke’ points. There are areas where the fuel load is reduced by either grazing, controlled burning or cutting. Spraying is an option but not on sensitive areas. Typically they manage choke points which are typically 25-40 hectares by burning/cutting 6-7 ha of this per year.

These choke points were identified using consultants Powercoaster Foundations based in Catalonia. The model identifies choke points, models fire outbreaks and the priorities in terms of land management and fire fighting. Multi agency training is required to undertake prescribed burning in order to manage the choke points. The burning season is from the 1st September to the 14th of April.

At this point the group were taken to see areas actively managed as choke points. Also we were taken to the depot where we were shown the various equipment and tools acquired to undertake prescribed burning and which is and can be made available for fire fighting.

The meeting closed at 4.30 pm.

**Summary & CR thoughts:**

* NI approach is very much a collaborative one but very much driven by Colum McDaid from the Environment Agency NI.
* Significant political incentive to push the project back in 2011.
* Firebreaks appears to be an outdated term, choke points is the term in vogue.
* Choke points are identified by computer modelling.
* Burning, cutting and spraying are the tools used to develop choke points.
* Digging is not an option used in the Mourne Mountains Fire Resilience Plan.
* Major emphasis on protecting sensitive ecological receptors both when managing the landscape for fire and during episodes of fire.
* Resources are essential and importantly sharing those resources is critical to managing the choke points and fighting wild fires.
* Training is critical for the Fire Service as well as land managers/owners.
* My thoughts:
	+ Use computer modelling to establish choke points.
	+ Once identified, the management options for the choke points can be devised and discussed.
	+ Train and equip personnel to manage the choke points.
	+ In parallel the Fire Service will need to train staff in fighting wildfires. Also an advanced course for a tactical firefighting role will need to be undertaken.
	+ As with all things funding is critical.