

PSPO Evidence - Fires & BBQs

Personal Statement

Name	Richard Burke
Organisation	Forestry England
Job title	RMS Programme Manager and Duty Manager
Role description	<p>I lead on Forestry England's participation in the New Forest recreation Management Strategy work. I also develop our response to the RMS actions including taking forward actions and working with partners to gain consent for delivery of our actions. I have worked in the New Forest for 20 years, initially as a Forester managing the South of the Crown Lands of the New Forest and then as District Recreation Manager responsible for recreation management and community engagement in the New Forest and Dorset.</p> <p>I have been on the Forestry England Duty Manager roster for 19 years, assuming responsibility for our response to out of hours incidents such as storms, missing persons, supporting out of hours colleagues and wildfire response.</p>

The Activity

As one of the Forestry England Duty Managers I take reports from our 24hr call centre of incidents that threaten life or property or need an escalated response. I find increasingly that the general public are calling us, passing on reports of irresponsible forest visitors having charcoal barbeques and wild-campers and groups having campfires and bonfires on Forestry England land in the New Forest.

This is happening continuously and repeatedly despite recent campaigns outlining fires, campfires and BBQ's being banned by Forestry England or prohibited under our byelaws. I have personally attended some of these incidents and had to extinguish campfires that had burnt into the ground whilst the occupants of the wild-camp sat and watched me. With no real threat from our byelaws and no real consequences we see people doing the same thing again and again.

I have had reports from our Rangers that members of the public on our sites are refusing not to light their disposable BBQ despite us attending the site during a joint patrol with HFRS staff. In that case even the Police attended but were unable to take action as the persons BBQ was attended, despite it being prohibited under our byelaws. On the weekend at the same site HFRS had to attend a BBQ that had set fire to the Forest vegetation in a similar location.

When we don't get timely reports of this activity through our responsible and community minded forest visitors we are often left to deal with a more significant wildfire as result of an unattended campfire or BBQ that has been left "extinguished" but has really burnt into the ground and rekindled some hours later.

This weekend just gone (6-7th August 2022) I was on duty and dealt with 7 significant fires in the New Forest that were a result of discarded BBQ's and unattended campfires. This is alongside a number of BBQ's and Campfires that were reported and extinguished by our Rangers that didn't result in wildfire. .

Seldom do Wildfires start by lightning strikes or discarded glass in the UK. In the New Forest in my considerable experience in this subject all our wildfires excepting those caused deliberately by arson are caused in some way by BBQ's and Campfires.

I am aware that during this statement I have mentioned a number of issues arising from my most recent period as Duty Manager. During the 7 days between the 1st and 8th August I spent 29 hours over and above my regular 37 hour week dealing with Campfires, BBQ's and wildfires caused by these. [REDACTED] and most of that time was evenings and weekends. I have drawn your attention to these as these very clearly demonstrate the long term but increasing risk that we face from this activity. The records that we have also provided set out that this is a persistent and ongoing risk to the community and with out a step change which I believe a PSPO will bring, nothing will change for the better.

The Impact

Every hour spent dealing with bbqs and fires or extinguishing the resulting wildfires means our staff who are often local members of the community themselves are called out to work on evenings and weekends, often putting themselves in a potentially dangerous

situation and are often unable to carry out their core work. That core work is the work that keeps the publicly accessible open space in the New Forest in the condition that visitors come to expect. Our staff are normally engaged in keeping our visitor facilities safe and in good order, engaging and helping our visitors enjoy their day out in the New Forest and delivering our core habitat management work across the New Forest.

As well as our staff being tied up with on dealing with the aftermath of BBQ's and campfires HFRS are tied up for long periods dealing with the resulting issues. Their resources are often stretched as dealing with wildfires ties up appliances and crews for long periods of time, sometimes days. Often the crews are retained and members of the local community, giving up their family time and their time at work to deal with the results of fires and BBQ's.

All of the wildfires that took place this weekend took repeated visits to fully extinguish with one approximately a hectare in size taking 9 HFRS fire appliances, 2 Forestry England Tractor Tankers, and 2 of our small fire appliances working over a period on 20 hours and requiring follow up visits by HFRS and FE staff on Sunday and on the Monday morning to damp down again.

We have seen from the Wareham wildfire in 2020 the impact that a large-scale fire can have on the public in that public services can be tied up for days or weeks, roads are closed, tourism is closed down and the public are unable to enjoy their local greenspace.

Following the Wareham wildfire Dorset Council worked with Forestry England to put a PSPO in place for fires, BBQ's and fireworks on our land in Dorset. This was unchallenged through the public consultation and was supported by stakeholders and the public and is now in place. I had no reports of wildfires, campfires or BBQ's from the Dorset area that I covered as Duty Manager in the same week that we had numerous campfires, BBQ's and wildfires in the New Forest.

Timing

Any BBQ has the potential to cause a serious fire in the New Forest due to the native heathland vegetation and conifer plantations. Similarly, any campfire or bonfire is likely if not reported to us or HFRS to burn into the ground and cause a wildfire.

The fire season is long here in the south, and increasing in length due to our changing climate, now running from February to October. The visitor season is also elongating and what was a summer peak of visitors now extends from Easter to November.

In my time here small fires have been numerous throughout the summer months but there seems to have been a step change in the last 3 or 4 years with increasingly hazardous summer conditions.

The increasingly dry spring conditions and hot summers we seem to be experiencing more regularly not only increase the risk of fire but also increase the intensity of the fires we have, with the dry conditions making it extremely time consuming to fully extinguish wildfires. With an increase in intensity fire becomes more unpredictable and a risk to those dealing with it or using the Forest.

Geography

The log of campfire and BBQ reports we have supplied demonstrates that the activity is still happening across the whole of the Forestry England estate in the New Forest. In recent weeks as Duty Manager in July and August I have dispatched our response officers and wildfire trained staff to Wildfires caused by BBQ's and campfires at locations from Godshill, through Burley, Brockenhurst, Denny Lodge, Kings Hat and Fawley amongst other locations. Some of these fires have taken significant numbers of HFRS staff and resources as well as Forestry England Wildfire appliances and staff.

Richard Burke
12/8/2022