

HOWTH S.A.A.O

Fire Management Policy Guidelines

Contents

- 1.0. Introduction**
- 1.1. Fire as a tool to manage the wildlife value of heathland vegetation**
- 1.2. The use of fire as a vegetation management tool by landowners**
 - 1.2.1 The role of the Parks Division, F.C.C.**
 - 1.2.1 Heathland area to be excluded**
 - 1.2.3 Extent of fire-break**
 - 1.2.4 Timing of works**
 - 1.2.5 Use of herbicides**
 - 1.2.6 Disposal of plant materials**
 - 1.2.7 Maintenance of fire-break**
- 1.3. Information to landowners and the public**
- 1.4. Research and monitoring**
- 1.5. Agreement of all stakeholders**

1.0. Introduction

These guidelines cover a range of general issues related to the use of fire as a management tool and to the control of unmanaged fires which threaten wildlife and households. They cover land within the SAAO order; which includes land within the proposed candidate Special Area for Conservation the management of which is principally the responsibility of Duchas.

These guidelines are based on research and consultations carried out for LPG1 established under the SEMPA project and were considered by the Howth SAAO Management Committee.

1.1. Fire as a Tool to Manage the Wildlife Value of Heathland Vegetation

Due to lack of resources and expertise it is not feasible at present, to plan, initiate and monitor a properly scientifically based programme to manage heathland vegetation using fire. In the long term this may not have a significant effect on wildlife values as unmanaged random fires are maintaining uneven aged patches of heathland throughout the headland.

As fire will not be used as a management tool, scrub and trees which are invading very old heathland areas should be cleared mechanically. This management work should now be given priority by the landowners and Parks Department.

1.2. The Use of Fire as a Vegetation Management Tool by Landowners

1.2.1 The role of the Parks Division F.C.C.

The general use of fire to manage vegetation should be forbidden. The only exception to this is the development of fire breaks to ensure public safety. The following advice and assistance should be given to any member of the public who is concerned about the risk to their property of an unmanaged fire starting accidentally or deliberately. This advice should be provided by a well briefed official from the Parks Department who has some expertise in heathland ecology.

The proposed site for a fire break should always be visited by this official from the Parks Division. The aim of the site visit is to meet with the landowner, examine the vegetation being affected and explain the appropriate approach.

1.2.2. Heathland to be excluded

The type of vegetation which can be treated in this way is likely to be dominated by bracken or gorse. No burning should take place on coastal lowland heathland. This type of heathland is found on hill tops and near the coast and can be characterised as follows:

... Cover of Ling heather, bell heather and dwarf gorse constitute >50% of the vegetation cover

... Bare ground is present between the plants and will cover 10-20% of the area

... Soil present (without flowering plants) and will cover the same area

... Height of vegetation will always be less than 45cm (18").

1.2.3. Extent of fire-break

The final decision on the extent of the fire break should be made by the landowner. Consideration should be given to minimising the area of natural vegetation affected while clearing an area which will limit the risk of fire to property and the general public.

1.2.4. Timing of works

Vegetation should never be interfered with during the bird nesting season i.e. between February and September.

1.2.5. Use of herbicides

Herbicides can be used to kill existing vegetation. Advice from the Parks division on relevant herbicides should be followed. This should only be applied judiciously at the right stage of the growing season and on windless days.

1.2.6. Disposal of plant materials

Care should be taken to properly dispose of dead plant materials. Shredding and

the use of resulting material as a mulch is the most environmentally friendly and preferred means of disposal. Controlled burning by experienced personnel can also be used. Plant materials should never be dumped on the Peninsula where it threatens wildlife and scenic values i.e. an area dominated by natural wild vegetation.

Burning of **dead plant** material can take place at any time of the year.

1.2.7. **Maintenance of fire-break**

The fire break strip should be maintained by the planting of a grass strip (seeded with locally sourced wildflower seed i.e. collect seed heads in summer) which can be mown occasionally. A less environmentally approach is to seed with rye-grass or to maintain the fire-break by regular application of herbicides.

Information to the Public on Fire

Information notice boards should explain the risk to vegetation (wildlife values and public safety) from fire, highlight the vulnerability of coastal heathland (which may never recover from fire) and contain telephone numbers of relevant fire fighting service.

An information leaflet to householders should summarise policy on fire breaks, invite contact with the Parks Division and highlight the value of coastal lowland heathland.

Any open days field trips on the Peninsula should highlight the fire risk and SAAO policy.

Research and Monitoring

The work carried out by Mulroe in 1997 which characterised the age profile of heathland vegetation should be repeated in 2007 to discover the effect of the SAAO management policy on fire.

All fire breaks should be mapped on the SAAO GIS.

Agreement of All Stakeholders

The SAAO management committee should take responsibility for ensuring that the fire policy developed by the committee is endorsed by all stakeholders implying a commitment of resources to ensure its implementation.”
