

Wildfires in Wales

Wildfires are a persistent, widespread, costly and potentially dangerous issue in South Wales. Between 2000 and 2008 there were over 55,000 recorded grassfires and nearly 550 forest fires in South Wales. There are eight times more wildfires per unit area in South Wales than in the United Kingdom as a whole. Estimates of the cost per wildfire range from £1,000 to £1,950. South Wales Fire and Rescue Service (SWFRS) estimate the annual cost of wildfire in their service area at around £7m.



"There is probably more of a mindset up here, because it's historical, because it's become part of the culture... It's also never been looked upon as being particularly serious. Everyone moans about it, but it has never been seen as if one of the kids has set fire to somebody's shed, or car"
[Station commander – SWFRS]

Background

Every year, significant areas of grassland and forest in the South Wales Valleys region are lost to fires, posing a significant threat to people, livestock, wildlife and property. The region is characterised by a largely post-industrialised economy, with high levels of unemployment and social deprivation. It is widely believed that the majority of these fires are deliberately started by people although, prior to this research, there was a lack of scientific evidence to support this view.

Objectives

The 'Wildfires in Wales' project sought to characterise and understand the problem of wildfires, focusing on the social factors which lay behind the issue. This knowledge was used to offer recommendations for appropriate management and policy responses. The project set out to address a number of key research questions:

- Where and when do wildfires happen in South Wales?
- What are the community and institutional stakeholder perceptions of wildfires?
- Who is perceived to be responsible for committing wildfire arson in South Wales?
- What are the motivations for wildfire arson in South Wales?
- What strategies are currently being used to mitigate against wildfires and how successful are they?

Methods

The project adopted a mixed-methods approach, involving:

- A literature review to draw on an international evidence base relating to arson and its motivations, wildfire research and research into the social drivers of wildfires.
- Semistructured interviews and research encounters with a variety of respondents, including institutional stakeholders and local residents, with a particular focus on young people.
- Spatial analysis of Fire and Rescue Service fire incidence data.

Findings

- Our research establishes distinct temporal, geographical and social patterns to incidences of wildfire. A key finding is that firesetting is tied into other socio-economic factors in communities neighbouring woodlands, such as high levels of deprivation. This evidence can be used to inform the planning and targeting of wildfire arson prevention strategies.
- Mitigation strategies that are currently employed in South Wales take different forms, which we have categorised as 'educational' and 'operational'. While all the cases evaluated as part of this research have had some positive outcomes, developing effective interventions will require agencies to work in partnership and to address the wider social drivers of wildfire arson.
- There is low public awareness of wildfires in South Wales. Although people might recognise that wildfires are started deliberately, they are not seen as a particularly important issue.
- The majority view is that young people are responsible for wildfire arson in South Wales. In some areas, however, residents are more likely to blame farmers or land owners.
- There is a wide range of motivations for wildfire arson. Motivations differ for different types of firesetter. Understanding the motivations of different firesetter types is key to effective intervention.

Recommendations

Our research offers a number of specific recommendations for each organisation involved in tackling wildfires (see final report). Recommendations that apply to all stakeholder organisations are as follows:

- Awareness of wildfires among the general public should be increased.
- Partnership working between organisations should be encouraged and adequately resourced.
- Preventative measures should be focused on areas of high incidence rather than as a blanket approach across the region.
- Low-key responses to some wildfires may reduce the thrill factor for young perpetrators.
- Financial partnerships should be created between landowners and the fire service to share the cost of helicopter provision.
- Community organisations are well placed to deliver anti-wildfire education and messages.

Partners

This project was a collaboration between Forest Research, Forestry Commission Wales, Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service and South Wales Fire and Rescue Service.

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Reports and Publications

Final Report and Executive Summary (available in Welsh and English) are available at: www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/wildfiresinwales