Scottish Parliament Information Centre
Ionad Fiosrachaidh Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Criminal Justice Committee
Wednesday 25 November 2026
13th Meeting, 2026 (Session 7)

Wildfire Resilience

Introduction

Today's evidence session provides an opportunity to question two panels of witnesses:

- **panel 1** – Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) and Fire Brigades Union
- **panel 2** – Scottish Government and Scottish Wildfire Forum.

Issues which may be explored include:

1. The response to wildfires in recent years (including challenges, lessons learned, the experience of frontline firefighters, and multi-agency partnership work).
2. What needs to be done to ensure that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and partners are well-placed to respond to future wildfire risks.
3. What preventative action is required to help reduce the risks of future wildfires.

This paper provides background information to help inform the session.

Wildfires in Scotland

The SFRS website (see Understanding wildfires in Scotland) states that:

> "Wildfires are classified as large, uncontrolled outdoor fires exceeding 1,000 square meters of burned area on appropriate land types.
>
> These fires are unplanned, uncontrolled, and unpredictable, and occur in areas with combustible vegetation that can fuel rapid spread."

It goes on to outline common causes of wildfires (e.g. unattended barbecues, glass bottles focusing heat, controlled burns gone wrong, and deliberate fire setting) noting that most are started by human activity.

A SPICe briefing on land use in Scotland (August 2026) includes information on wildfires. It notes that recent years have seen severe wildfires in rural Scotland, notably:

- a peatland wildfire in Caithness and Sutherland in 2019 – see Huge Flow Country wildfire 'doubled Scotland's emissions' (BBC report, November 2019)
- a wildfire near Cannich in 2023 – see Cannich wildfire could be largest recorded in UK (BBC report, May 2023)
- wildfires at Carrbridge and Dava in 2025 – see Highland wildfires were 'biggest in Scotland's history' (BBC report, July 2025)
- a fire near Aviemore, in the Cairngorms National Park, in 2026 – see 'Apocalyptic' damage as Cairngorms wildfire burns for two weeks (BBC report, July 2026).

The briefing includes reference to a report produced by the James Hutton Institute (March 2023) looking at wildfire risks in different habitat types. That report notes analysis indicating that:

> "most small wildfires in the UK occur at the rural-urban interface or on arable land, as this is where fires are most likely to be ignited by human activity; however, many of the larger wildfires occur in more remote areas, especially moorland, forests, and peatland bog". (page 5)

The SPICe briefing also highlights the impact of climate change on the likelihood of wildfires, referring to a recent study on UK heatwaves and temperate wildfire risk published in Nature (September 2025) which found that "climate change is resulting in more extreme fire weather during major heatwaves".

In September 2026, there was a members' business debate in the Scottish Parliament on Wildfires and Other Climate Shocks.

Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

Wildfire planning and response is coordinated by the SFRS.

In its 2023 wildfire strategy, the SFRS stated that it was "in the implementation stage of delivering a new strategy for developing and enhancing its wildfire capability", and that:

> "Upon completion, we anticipate that the impact of wildfires in Scotland will reduce, and SFRS will see a more efficient and streamlined approach to dealing with these types of incidents.
>
> SFRS aims to not only modernise its wildfire response, but also to ensure that Scotland has a world-class wildfire prevention and mitigation culture that ensures that the natural resources we enjoy in Scotland are resilient to the negative impact that climate change might bring, and that the devastating impact of wildfire on Scotland's rural communities is reduced."

In relation to the whole range of work carried out by the SFRS, the organisation has been carrying out a Service Delivery Review to look at ways of reshaping and modernising the organisation. It states that.

> "The primary aim is to ensure that resources – staff, stations and appliances – are matched to operational risk and demand across Scotland."

An information pack, published as part of the Service Delivery Review, referred to the need to change ways of working in response to changing demands. By way of example, it noted that:

> "we are seeing fewer house fires but more flooding and wildfire incidents – often in areas that do not have permanently staffed fire stations".

The SFRS Board met on 22 June 2026 to consider the recommendations developed from the Service Delivery Review. The minutes of and papers for that meeting have been published. Discussion included the issue of wildfires. For example, the minutes note that:

> "JH [Jon Henderson, Assistant Chief Officer] advised the Board that the New and Emerging Risks Group had specific sub-groups focused on flooding and wildfire. JH highlighted the work in relation to wildfire, which included multi agency contributions in forecasting future risk, strengthening preparedness across both the Service and Scotland more widely and learning from previous incidents. JH provided a brief overview of the Service's work with academic partners, including University of Edinburgh, in relation to both flooding and wildfire to learn from past events, assess potential future developments and plan for future incidents." (page 6)

Funding for the SFRS was considered as part of recent pre-budget scrutiny carried out by the Criminal Justice Committee. The Committee's report (November 2026) includes a recommendation that:

> "the Scottish Government ensure that SFRS has the long-term revenue and capital resources, training and equipment required to respond to the increasing frequency and severity of climate-related emergencies, including flooding, wildfires and other extreme weather events. This should be informed by a long-term assessment of climate-related operational risks and developed in partnership with the workforce and affected communities." (para 167)

Scottish Government

Recent Scottish Government activity in this area has included hosting Wildfire Summit in October 2025. The then Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity provided the Scottish Parliament with an update on its outcomes in November 2025. Stating, for example:

> "Land managers and gamekeepers are on the front line of wildfire prevention and response. We owe them a debt of gratitude for the valuable role that they have always played in controlling wildfires. Their intimate knowledge of the land and

terrain remains crucial. That is why we must strike a balance that recognises their expertise, supports sustainable practices and enables them to work in partnership with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service."

"We must strengthen our preparedness. A gap in multi-agency training was identified. We will work with the Scottish multi-agency resilience training and exercising unit to develop a national table-top exercise and to improve preparedness in a truly collaborative way across all agencies. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has invested £1.6 million in wildfire response assets, including personal protective equipment, all-terrain vehicles, fogging units and drones. Further investment is currently being considered. We are exploring a mountain rescue-style voluntary response model, with trained wildfire wardens to support local efforts."

In March 2026, the Scottish Government published a Strategic Action Plan on Wildfires. It notes that the plan is structured around three core pillars of prevention, preparedness and response. It highlights a range of actions under each pillar. For example:

- prevention – strengthening public awareness of wildfire risks; enhancing wildfire early warning systems; and implementing new fire prevention byelaws
- preparedness – SFRS investment in new wildfire units; and strengthening of multi-agency training
- response – developing a multi-agency 'Concept of Operations' to help clarify the roles of various organisations involved in responding to wildfires; and exploring a mountain rescue-style approach to trained wildfire volunteers.

Scottish Wildfire Forum

The Scottish Wildfire Forum plays a role in planning and preparedness for wildfires. It is chaired by the SFRS, with membership including:

- Cairngorms National Park Authority
- Forestry and Land Scotland
- local authorities – Dumfries and Galloway Council, and Highland Council
- NFU Scotland
- Scottish Environment Protection Agency
- Scottish Gamekeepers Association.

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