**SUBMISSION TO THE**

**HOUSE OF COMMONS PETITIONS COMMITTEE**

**GROUSE SHOOTING ENQUIRY**

**FROM**

**NORTHERN FARMERS & LANDOWNERS GROUP**

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The Northern Farmers and Landowners Group (NFLG) membership covers the management of almost 250,000 acres of farmland and forestry across the North East of England. Much of the land represented is upland grazing and this includes significant areas managed as grouse moors. As part of my role with NFLG, I act as the independent Chairman for the Northumberland Fire Group (NFG), a role that I have held for about 10 years. There are other organisations which will be better placed to comment on the socio-economic and environmental benefits of grouse moor management, so I intend to focus my comments on the issue of wildfire.

NFG was established in 2006 due to the increasing threat of devastating wildfires caused by climate change, with the forecast of warmer springs and hotter, drier summers. It is a partnership between Northumberland Fire & Rescue Service (NFRS), Northumberland National Park, Natural England, the Forestry Commission, the Ministry of Defence (Landmarc), Northumberland Wildlife Trust, private sector landowners and upland land managers, namely grouse moor Gamekeepers.

The purpose of the NFG is to raise awareness of the issue of wildfire, and improve the effectiveness of wildfire fighting within the county. While lessons have been learnt by NFRS through international co-operation, the greatest local benefits have come through partnership working with the local grouse moor keepers. These people are the ones with the local knowledge, specialist skills and equipment on site which can be deployed, in tandem with the NFRS, to tackle wildfires in the most efficient manner.

The need for the group and such a partnership approach was highlighted in 2007 when the devastating Harbottle fire destroyed 800 hectares of forestry and moorland that was not managed for grouse. Tackling the fire was very resource intensive, not only for the NFRS, but also for the Ministry of Defence and the Forestry Commission. While UK wildfires may seldom threaten life or high value property, tackling a wildfire will mean that Fire & Rescue Service personnel are deployed in remote locations, which may impact on their response time to fires elsewhere.

Elsewhere in the world, controlled burning is routinely used as a wildfire management tool with the creation of fuel-free fire breaks. This is not the case in the UK, where controlled fire is used for the management of vegetation most commonly associated with grouse moor management, with some burning carried out for agricultural purposes. However, this controlled burning work is vital for the management of moorland fuel load, plus it has the advantage that recently burnt areas can be used as fire breaks if wildfire should occur.

The result is that if a wildfire should occur on moorland managed for grouse shooting, it is unlikely to be very intense due to the reduced fuel load and it is much easier to contain as it can be steered towards areas free from fuel due to earlier controlled burning. Furthermore, skilled moorland grouse keepers will be on hand to assist the FRS personnel, complete with specialist vehicles suitable for accessing remote areas over rough terrain carrying specialist equipment for fighting wildfires.

If driven grouse shooting were to be banned with the associated loss of vegetation management, private sector skills and equipment in our remote uplands, there would be a corresponding increase in the risk of devastating wildfire in the uplands. It should be noted at this point that many of the upland areas subject to this increased risk are designated sites of environmental importance (ie SSSI, NNR, SAC etc).

The increased fuel load will result in more intense wildfires which would be considerably harder to control in denser vegetation with no fire breaks. This could result in the destruction of large areas of moorland vegetation, neighbouring forestry and potentially property, with associated loss of grazing and wildlife habitat, along with an increase in air and water pollution.

It stands to reason that the highest risk of wildfire will occur during long periods of hot, dry weather, usually associated with the summer months. Under these conditions, the underlying peat will also be dry and combustible. The worst case scenario is an intense, hot wildfire occurring in an area with a high fuel load overlying dry peat. The peat can then catch fire causing its destruction. Such a fire is exceptionally difficult to control and will result in the permanent loss of habitat and the significant release of stored carbon.

In short, NFLG firmly believes that the banning of driven grouse shooting, with the associated loss of vegetation management through controlled burning will lead to a significant increase in the risk of devastating wildfire in environmentally sensitive areas, with the potential for the permanent loss of habitats and livelihoods.