



Cyfoeth
Naturiol
Cymru
Natural
Resources
Wales

Rhondda trial case study

Healthy hillsides

Summary of the project

Healthy Hillsides is a collaborative approach to better manage the Rhondda's natural resources to help minimise the impact and severity of wildfires.

Wildfires deliberately caused by arson affect the South Wales Valleys every year. Proactive land management techniques can help reduce the extent of wildfires, to prevent them spreading across whole hillsides, devastating local wildlife and endangering communities.

A project officer is coordinating the collaborative approach, part-funded by NRW and hosted by the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales. The Officer is working with partners, local landowners and the community to produce a long term strategy for reducing wildfires in the Rhondda, and coordinating preventative works on the ground.



Impact from wildfire, Rhondda 2015

In spring 2015, there were 513 deliberate fires in Rhondda Cynon Taff. 244 of these were in the Rhondda.



Tylorstown hillside (before), winter '14-15



Tylorstown hillside (after burn), spring 2015

Why are we doing this?

Tackling and reducing wildfires caused by arson was identified as a priority risk to address by organisations, community groups and residents at NRW's stakeholder workshops in the Rhondda (as part of the trial). Wildfires can result in multiple impacts to local wildlife, air quality, water quality, access and recreation, fire officer safety, community safety and human health (wildfire smoke is toxic).



Examples of pro-active techniques being introduced in 2016 to help reduce the vegetation (fuel) on hillsides

Aims and objectives

Current climate change predictions indicate Wales will be likely to experience drier summers and wetter winters. These conditions mean wildfires could become even more frequent in the future. This project seeks to produce long term action that includes:

- taking a collaborative approach that delivers multi-benefits.
- coordinating pro-active land management measures to reduce the fuel load of the hillsides, such as: conservation grazing, controlled burns, cutting fire breaks, and clearance works. Work on the ground commenced in January 2016.
- restoring priority habitats and improvements to designated sites; encouraging natural woodland regeneration; improved habitat connectivity / resilience; and improvements to protected and priority species.
- supporting the rural economy by working with local farmers.
- working with local communities and volunteer networks to raise awareness and encourage greater resilience; identifying improvements for communities to access the countryside to encourage greater local ownership; raise greater awareness of risks to human health.










What we learnt about sustainable management of natural resources

Key learning points

- A multi-partner landscape approach to help tackle wildfires, a significant challenge in the Rhondda and wider South Wales Valleys' area.
- A new way of working. Enthusiasm and goodwill between partners is driving the project.
- Pro-active land management techniques incorporated as a way of helping to reduce the fuel load on hillsides. Techniques include: controlled burns, conservation grazing, bracken bashing, fire breaks.
- An integrated, wide-ranging approach to benefit people, the environment and economy.

- A collaborative approach is delivering a more sustainable project and will bring multi-benefits
- There is enthusiasm and goodwill between the organisations involved, who are working in new ways together. Partners believe this new approach will make a difference.
- The key organisations are adapting and learning through the approach. For example, the SW Fire & Rescue Service have re-structured local officers to help deliver an integrated way of working, purchasing machinery for vegetation management and dedicating 35 training days to wildfire management.
- The benefits of partnership working are wide-ranging, e.g. Fire safety sessions in Rhondda schools incorporating messages about wildlife and the environment; a framework for volunteer networks to be involved; improved habitats for wildlife; reduced burn areas helping officers better manage fires and bring savings to the local economy.
- Nature based solutions are a sustainable option to better meet the challenges facing Wales now, and in the future.

How did this project meet the principles of sustainable management of natural resources?

Principle		How we met this principle
	Collaboration and engagement	9 core partners on the steering group with supporting partners such as local farmers, volunteers, Probation Service, Public Health Wales.
	Evidence	SW FRS adapting their incident recording to incorporate 'size of area burnt', rather than point data. Vegetation monitoring underway to provide evidence of the effectiveness of the pro-active land management techniques.
	Long term	New approach, scale and scope will develop over time, introducing sustainable land management options and better integration between organisations. Developing long term funding bid.
	Scale	Initial focus on the Rhondda to develop partnership approach. If successful, it can be up-scaled across the South Wales valleys. Caerphilly, Neath Port Talbot and Merthyr Tydfil councils are part of the steering group.
	Multiple benefits	Improved wildlife and connectivity, improved efficiency and safety for the SW FRS, savings to the local economy, improvements to air and water quality, better access for recreation, innovative working between partners.
	Public participation	Incorporating local volunteer networks. Education and awareness raising, highlighting the impacts of wildfires on wildlife and health, in addition to fire safety.
	Preventative action	Pro-actively managing the fuel load on hillsides will minimise the severity, scale and impact of wildfires. Awareness raising to help encourage local appreciation of hillsides.
	Building resilience	Restoring the hillside habitat enhances the landscape and improves resilience to climate change.
	Adaptive management	Approach influenced the Fire & Rescue Service's way of working in the Rhondda, adapting to incorporate pro-active wildfire training, land management techniques (controlled burns, cutting etc), purchase of new machinery, in addition to their ongoing education programme.

How did this project meet the well-being goals within the Well-being of Future Generations Act?

Well-being goal	How does this project deliver against the goals?
A prosperous Wales	Pro-active management of the landscape through conservation grazing supports the rural economy. In the future, the conservation grade meat market is a potential avenue to explore with PONT.
A resilient Wales	Climate change predictions are for warmer and wetter winters, and longer, drier summers. This combination of conditions means wildfires could become more prevalent in the future. Pro-actively managing hillsides helps establish a landscape more resilient to extreme weather conditions, minimising the impacts and allowing quicker recovery of habitats.
A healthier Wales	Much of the Ffridd* hillside (characteristic habitat of the South Wales valleys is the margin between the valley bottom and the uplands) is designated open access land under the Crow Act. This allows free access for recreation to all people. Research shows that time spent outdoors is beneficial to people's physical and mental health.
A more equal Wales	Opportunities for volunteers, training and work experience. The project can help improve the Rhondda for people who live and work in the area, and minimise the devastating impact of wildfires on communities.
A Wales of cohesive communities	Communities in the valleys are intrinsically linked to their landscape, and many communities are located on / adjacent to open hillsides. Awareness raising, preventative measures and encouraging local ownership and positive behaviours will help make communities safer places to live and work.
A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language	Ffridd habitat is a cultural landscape, diverse and characteristic of the valleys. The hills have important heritage spots which can be better protected for future generations through habitat management.
A globally responsible Wales	Restoring Ffridd habitat to deliver more with our natural resources for ecosystem services will contribute to carbon storage, biodiversity protection and ecosystem resilience.

Partners

