Wales Climate Change and Resilience Summit – Wildfires

22 October 2026

Agenda Item 5 – Emergency response

Wildfire and wider preparedness in Wales

This paper sets out key points to support discussion under agenda item 5 and consider how wildfire preparedness and resilience across Wales can be strengthened. Attendees are invited to reflect on the issues raised and identify practical, deliverable actions to take forward after the Summit. In doing so, attendees are encouraged to build on existing activity, partnerships and good practice across Wales and beyond, helping to avoid duplication and support a coordinated approach.

Capacity and capability

This summer's wildfires stretched the capacity of the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) and other responders almost to breaking point. In mid-August, South Wales FRS had only a handful of appliances available to respond to non-wildfire incidents. As a result, it had to rely on assistance from other FRSs in Wales and England, and from the Army. Pressures elsewhere also required the diversion of large amounts of resource from other tasks. Much of the response was provided by retained firefighters who were called in from home or work.

That raises issues of capacity – the total volume of human and other resources which responders have available. However, given the complexity of the future we face the solution is not straightforward. While we can reasonably expect summer heatwaves to recur, we can also expect flooding, droughts and other climate linked and wider circumstances that we must be resilient too. There are important questions about what the function of significant extra resource would be if what we face is seasonal and only required for certain times of the year.

There are also issues of capability. Fighting a wildfire is very different from fighting a building fire. It calls for different procedures, tactics, skills, vehicles and equipment and exposes firefighters to different risks. Frontline fire appliances, for instance, are not designed for off-road use, and the standard personal protective equipment which firefighters use is too bulky to be worn in arduous terrain. More suitable vehicles and PPE are available: the question is whether there are sufficient quantities of them and sufficient training in their use.

Much was made over the summer about the lack of aerial firefighting capability. This is a UK-wide problem: there is no current UK based military capability and there are only few commercial helicopters and pilots capable of undertaking this work, and demand for them significantly exceeded supply across the UK for several weeks. While there may be scope to improve the contractual arrangements in place here, a long-term solution will almost certainly involve growing the market at a UK level, and/or developing a military capability to undertake aerial firefighting. That points to discussions with the UK and other devolved governments, which are already under way. It is not an issue we can resolve at this summit.

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Attendees are invited to reflect on the capacity and capability of emergency responders and partners and what steps would be needed to ensure is this is resilient to likely future rates of incidence of wildfire. This should include overall levels of human resources, vehicles and equipment; training and learning from good practice; the distribution of assets across Wales; and the arrangements for mobilising and deploying them. Consideration can also be given as to how preparedness for wildfires would support preparedness for wider resilience.

As part of that, attendees are invited to consider, from their own organisation's perspective, what technology, data, equipment or specialist capability could support both wildfire prevention and response. This should include how existing assets could be shared or deployed collectively as part of a multi-agency approach. For example, police drone support was used during the recent spate to improve situational awareness.

Community Resilience

Farmers, commoners and landowners hold valuable local knowledge and assets, including equipment, vehicles, water bowsers, machinery, grazing expertise and access routes. Many supported the response to the recent spate of wildfires, as did other individuals and community groups, often at considerable personal expense.

Attendees are invited to consider whether there is scope to formalise and enhance these kinds of arrangements. Those working on the land will often be the first to detect a wildfire, as well as having considerable resources, expertise and knowledge that can assist a firefighting response. This might involve some kind of network of interested parties and individuals, supported by the emergency services and by government, to define roles and responsibilities, establish clear channels of communication and provide recompense to those who make equipment and vehicles available.

Attendees are invited to consider how communities could support wildfire preparedness and response, building on existing local knowledge, networks and assets. This should include identifying what arrangements are already in place, such as established community groups, farming and commoners' organisations, voluntary groups, local resilience networks and land management partnerships.

International Best Practice

There are many nations – such as France, Spain, Greece, Canada, Australia and South Africa – where climate-driven wildfire risks significantly exceed those in Wales, and where arrangements for preventing and responding to them may be more advanced. We have already arranged for a senior wildfire incident commander from Australia to provide training to the Welsh FRSs. Attendees are invited to consider the current extent of learning from these jurisdictions, and the potential for enhancing it.

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Strategic Coordination

Co-ordination of the multi-agency response to this summer's wildfires was via established arrangements involving local resilience forums and dedicated strategic and tactical co-ordination groups, supported by the Welsh Government. This appeared to work well, with significant challenges and obstacles being rapidly identified and addressed. However, attendees are invited to consider whether there are any lessons to be learned and any improvements necessary to these arrangements.

As noted above, South Wales FRS made a request for military aid to the civil authority (MACA) in mid-August. This was processed and agreed rapidly: military personnel were identified, briefed and deployed on scene within 24 hours of the request being made. MACA is necessarily an option of last resort, and the capacity and capability of our armed forces is finite it also comes at a financial cost. Again, the process appeared to work well, but attendees are invited to consider whether there are any lessons to be learned around understanding the role of the armed forces in responding to civil incidents, and the processes for requesting and deploying military resources.