

Legislation

- The 'Heather and Grass Burning Code (2007)' – swaling is permitted between 1 November & 31 March in lowland areas.
- Ensure you have Natural England consent if your land is supported by Environmental Stewardship or is a designated site (eg SSSI). Scheduled monument consent may also be required from English Heritage.

Sources of funding

- Swaling is a traditional management technique that when used in conjunction with cattle grazing can help meet your 'indicators of success' under a Higher Level Stewardship scheme – this should be discussed with a Natural England advisor before an application is submitted.

Sources of information

- General information on the use of swaling within an Environmental Stewardship agreement can be obtained from Natural England. A copy of the Burning Code is available at www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/regulation/burning/default.aspx
- Working Wetlands holds swaling training events. Also contact Working Wetlands if you are unsure whether you are permitted to burn on your site. For more details contact the Working Wetlands team: tel 01409 221823 email working.wetlands@devonwildlifetrust.org

6

Advice note | Swaling



Swaling is a traditional technique that uses controlled burning to manage grassland and heath habitats. If carried out sympathetically, in conjunction with cattle grazing, swaling can be a very effective management tool for maintaining wildlife rich grasslands.

Swaling is used for the following reasons:

- **Burning removes accumulated dead plant material (thatch), and stimulates fresh growth.**
- **It helps to manage light scrub encroachment, eg willow, birch, gorse and blackthorn.**
- **If a burn is managed well it has wildlife benefits and can also improve the quality of grazing for livestock.**

The swaling plan

A swaling plan should be prepared in advance of the burn to ensure the safety of those involved and the success of the operation. The following should be considered:

- Look at the whole site and identify areas to burn. Target areas of encroaching light scrub (eg gorse) and where grazing pressure has been light, leaving a dense thatch of dead grass. Do not burn sensitive areas (eg woodland edge, thin soils, close to watercourses).
- Don't burn more than a third of a site in any one year. Burnt areas should always be less than five hectares. Don't burn the same site more frequently than once in five years.
- Assess potential for damage to surrounding areas and infrastructure (roads, electricity poles), and take necessary steps to eliminate this risk, (eg Cut fire-breaks and wait for correct weather conditions).
- List who to notify before burning occurs, (eg. Fire Service, neighbouring landowners, Natural England).
- Identify appropriate locations for firebreaks and cut in advance where possible.
- Arrange for trained assistants – one required for every five to ten metres of fire front.



The burn

When swaling grasslands the aim is for a very fast 'cool' burn. This is achieved by burning with the wind (not back-burning).

- Establish any fire-breaks required (ie. pre-mown and cleared of cuttings, or pre-burnt).
- The burn leader should position assistants where required.
- Burn a small area and then extinguish, to confirm wind direction and controllability etc.
- Light a manageable length of fire front and quickly control any fires breaking out in an undesired direction.
- Monitor progress of the burn and any changes in wind direction.
- Follow the burn as it progresses across the site to ensure it doesn't jump any fire-breaks.
- Always work upwind of the fire front.
- Ensure all fires are extinguished well before dusk and inform the Fire Service that burning has ceased.
- Monitor the site over the year to understand the effects and inform future management.

If the burn goes wrong:

- Keep calm.
- Ensure all assistants are safe. If there's no threat to property, monitor carefully and be prepared to call for assistance if the situation escalates.
- If experience allows and if safe to do so, control the edges of the fire front to reduce sideways spread with beaters.

When to burn?

- In the winter months, within the period allowed by the 'Heather and Grass Burning Code (2007)' – see Legislation section overleaf.
- During periods of dry weather with a light steady breeze (8 - 12 mph).

Health and Safety

- Carry out a risk assessment detailing site specific hazards, the likelihood of occurrence and measures you will take to reduce them.
- Wear natural fibre clothing, as this is less flammable (avoid fleeces etc), sturdy boots and maybe a dust-mask. Consider wearing eye protection.
- Have a first-aid kit to hand, including sufficient clean water for treating burns.
- Have a reliable means of communication (check mobile phone coverage in advance).
- One person should be identified as the 'burn leader' - they should brief all assistants on the swaling plan and method.

Equipment

- Fire beaters: one for each assistant.
- Fire starters: such as weed-wands (with spare gas canisters).
- Water bowsers are a useful tool to wet fire breaks and to help control the burn.

