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 an Environmental Stewardship or is a designated site (e.g. 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 adviser 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.natureengland.org.uk/naturewkst/workingwetlands

- 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: 01489 321633
  - Email: working.wetlands@devonwildliferest.org

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Swaling is a traditional technique that uses controlled burning to manage grassland and heath habitats. It carries 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, e.g. 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 (e.g. gorse) and where grazing pressure has been light, leaving a dense patch of dead grass. Do not burn sensitive areas (e.g. woodland edges, thin soils, above 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 (e.g. Cut fire-break and wait for correct weather conditions).
- List who to notify before burning occurs, (e.g. Fire Service, neighbouring farmers, 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 (i.e. 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 batters.

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 (6 – 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 woollens) 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 containers).
- Water bottles are a useful tool to wet fire breaks and to help control the burn.