

**Denbighshire County Council's Communities Scrutiny Committee  
Review of the Llantysilio Mountain Fire of the summer of 2018  
20 March 2019**

**Denbighshire County Council's Countryside Service's submission**

**Session Two - Review of land management arrangements.**

**Background**

Heather moorland is a special feature of the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley AONB and in global terms is one of our rarest habitats. As such it is designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest and Special Area of Conservation. Heather moorland is also identified as a priority habitat under Denbighshire's Corporate Plan.

The majority of heather moorland in Denbighshire, including Llantysilio Mountain is Common Land. This means that although it has an owner a number of farmers have rights to graze sheep. Sheep grazing and the management associated with it are essential for maintaining these areas in good condition. Traditional management includes a combination of cutting and burning in order to encourage new growth. Controlled burning is often favoured over cutting because the heat and smoke stimulates the germination of heather and bilberry seed so regeneration is more effective. In Wales, it is only legal to burn between 1<sup>st</sup> October and 31<sup>st</sup> March

Over the last 50 years or so there has been a significant reduction in the agricultural management of heathland areas and it has been increasingly difficult to maintain hill flocks in these areas.

**Heather and Hillforts Project 2005 - 2012**

The Heather and Hillforts project was a 5 year Heritage lottery funded project which focused on the moorlands of the Clwydian Range and Llantysilio Mountain.

The project recognised that moorlands in the UK are in decline as a result of significant barriers to sustainable management. The project appointed a Moorland Field Officer who worked with the farming communities to identify and overcome the specific barriers to retaining these areas as part of the agricultural system and establish long term management programmes that would benefit upland grazing.

Significant work was undertaken to reduce the extent of bracken through aerial spraying, as well as work with landowners and graziers to improve the condition of heathland.

Over the 5 years the project delivered the following:

- Mapped the condition of vegetation across the Clwydian Range and Llantysilio Mountain in 2005 and 2010.
- Carried out programmes of burning and cutting with graziers and provided equipment for heathland management.

- Carried out aerial bracken spraying in order to improve heathland areas for grazing.
- Provided demonstration and training in management techniques.
- Worked with the Fire Service to promote responsible burning and management programmes in order to reduce fuel load and vulnerability to fire.
- Worked with Llysfasi College Agriculture Students to promote and teach heathland management techniques.

The Moorland Field Officer also had a role in working with the graziers to get necessary Special Area of Conservation (SAC) Consents in place for works, mapping and reporting on management carried out and ensuring that burning plans and management plans were in place. These requirements often presented significant barriers to work being carried out so the Moorland Field Officer was able to help overcome these.

### **Work since 2012**

The Heather and Hillforts Project finished in 2012. Since then there has been no Moorland Field Officer in post.

However, the AONB has continued where possible to support graziers wishing to carry out works on Llantysilio Mountain and to assist graziers with the NRW consent process.

Where possible practical support with burning and cutting has been offered to graziers through the area Ranger Team, often working with Agriculture students from Llysfasi College.

Since 2009 the AONB working with graziers have carried out:

71 acres of heather burning across Llantysilio Mountain

23 acres of heather cutting

A further 73 acres of cutting has been carried out with the RSBP.

### **Looking forward**

NRW are in the process of commissioning a detailed assessment of the damage to the mountain following the fire.

In some areas where the fire has burnt into the peat layers the soil structure and the seed stock has been destroyed. It is likely that these areas will be very slow to recover. In these areas further soil loss through wind and water run off may become an issue.

In other areas it is likely that bracken and gorse will spread rapidly into burnt areas of the mountain as both plants thrive after burning and out compete other vegetation. This will present additional challenges to re-establishing grazing on the mountain. In some areas the heather and bilberry will recover over the next few seasons.

### **Meeting with the Graziers**

The AONB and NRW met with the graziers on 11th February this year to discuss opportunities and challenges for management on the mountain following the fire.

NRW are working on putting a Management Agreement in place with the landowners on Llantysilio that will provide a framework for payments to graziers for agreed management works.

Obvious immediate issues were identified in stocking of the burned and damaged areas. NRW agreed that they would not be looking for any reduction in stocking but it was recognised that there may be issues with stock moving away from their traditional hefts in these areas in search of suitable grazing.

One of the issues identified was the difficulty of dealing with gorse and scrub on steep slopes where it is not possible to gain access with a tractor and where slopes are too steep to burn safely.

With areas like this in mind the AONB has secured funding through Cadwyn Clwyd to trail and demonstrate a Robo-Flail – a driverless flail mower capable of working on very steep slopes. Over the last few weeks a number of demonstrations events for farmers and land managers have been held across the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley including Llantysilio and the Horseshoe Pass.

Where time and resources allow the Countryside Service will continue to offer support to graziers who want to carry out management on Llantysilio.

It is worth noting that Denbighshire County Council own significant areas of heather moorland at Moel Famau and Ranger teams are also engaged in similar management across these areas.