

Fixed Date: Monday 27th July 2026

John Swinney MSP
First Minister of Scotland

Dear First Minister,

Wildfire Prevention, Upland Management and Muirburn Licensing

I write on behalf of NSA Scotland regarding the recent wildfires in the Highlands and the lessons that must be learned from these devastating events.

The scale of the damage caused by these fires has highlighted the importance of active land management in reducing wildfire risk. NSA Scotland believes that there must now be a serious and evidence-based discussion about the role of sheep farming, controlled grazing and muirburn in managing Scotland's upland landscapes.

Many sheep farmers have become increasingly concerned by policies and land management approaches that have led to a reduction in grazing livestock on some areas of hill ground. While these decisions have often been taken with environmental objectives in mind, it is important to recognise the practical contribution that sheep make in reducing fuel loads by grazing grasses and other vegetation that can otherwise accumulate and increase wildfire risk.

Alongside grazing, controlled muirburn has long been used as a land management tool by those with extensive local knowledge and practical experience. The recent fires have demonstrated the importance of maintaining every available tool that can help reduce the build-up of combustible material across our uplands.

For this reason, NSA Scotland is particularly concerned about the implementation of the new muirburn licensing regime. We request the Scottish Government to consider delaying the legislation while its practical implications are fully assessed in light of the recent wildfire events.



A significant concern is the requirement for individuals involved in muirburn operations to undertake formal training, regardless of whether they have decades of practical experience. While training has an important role to play, the associated costs will place additional pressure on already stretched rural businesses. There is also a real risk that there may be insufficient numbers of suitably trained and accredited personnel available when the legislation comes into force.

This could create an unintended consequence whereby land managers who would otherwise undertake responsible muirburn choose not to do so because of uncertainty around compliance. Such inaction risks allowing further accumulation of combustible vegetation, potentially increasing rather than reducing the risk of future wildfires.

Given the significant environmental damage, public costs and pressure on emergency services witnessed in recent weeks, it would seem prudent to ensure that legislation does not inadvertently hinder those whose objective is to prevent such events occurring again.

NSA Scotland would also highlight the wider benefits of maintaining sheep on our hills. The decline of sheep numbers in some areas has coincided with growing concerns around tick populations and the spread of tick-borne diseases, including Lyme disease. For decades, well-managed and appropriately treated sheep flocks have played an important role in reducing tick burdens, delivering benefits for livestock, wildlife and public health.

The recent wildfires have focused minds on the importance of resilient and practical land management. We believe that Scotland's farmers, shepherds and other land managers possess invaluable knowledge built up over generations and that their experience should be central to future discussions on wildfire prevention and upland policy.

NSA Scotland would welcome the opportunity to discuss these matters further and to contribute positively to the development of policies that protect our environment while supporting the people who actively manage Scotland's rural landscapes.

Yours sincerely,

Alec Telfer

Chairman

NSA Scotland

