



A Guide to Good
Practice

Vegetation
Management

On Upland and Moorland
Commons

The Federation of Yorkshire Commoners and Moorland Graziers aims:

1. To be a representative voice to support and protect the commons
2. To support better collaboration amongst commoners
3. To ensure that hill farming on common land is a worthwhile and viable activity
4. To promote positive management of the environment by commoners
5. To improve public understanding of the commons
6. To these ends, to engage with all interested parties to put forward the case of the commoners in a vigorous and constructive manner.

The Federation has prepared a series of 'Guides to Good Practice' which are intended to help commoners to deal with selected key issues. The Guides aim to share experience from different commons and to help commoners understand how others approach key issues.

Guides to Good Practice have been prepared for the following issues:

Vegetation Management

Management Planning

Agri-environment Schemes

Marketing

Each 'Guide to Good Practice' generally consists of a 2 page summary together with the main guide.

It is intended that the Guides will be updated on a regular basis, as new information is gathered and new policies or advice are introduced. Please contact the administrator of the Federation with any comments or suggestions.

The other Guides are available from:

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to provide a useful source of advice and information to members of the Federation of Yorkshire Commoners and Moorland Graziers, and others, on the appropriate management of vegetation, focussing on upland and moorland commons (hereafter referred to as 'moors'). It is intended as a point of reference for commoners and graziers when considering their management practises and options for the future. The guide draws together advice and information from a range of sources and advises on how to address the pressing issue of vegetation management.

There is considerable diversity within the Yorkshire commons in terms of vegetation and the way it is managed, the type and intensity of grazing, the environmental status and designations, and the issues affecting the commons such as access and shooting.

The vegetation of the Yorkshire moors would naturally have been woodland but has been maintained in its current state by many years of agricultural use. Due to the fact that most moors consist of relatively unimproved land, they now comprise an important environmental resource with designations such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) covering many areas.

The moors are of interest to many different individuals and groups with different interests such as farmers, conservationists, shooters and walkers. Many moors are multi-use. Most commons are in private ownership and the owners will be one of the interested groups.

Recent changes to agricultural payments, the introduction of cross compliance and the changes to the environmental payments make it an appropriate time to review the way in which the vegetation on the moors is managed and look at the new opportunities that may be available to commoners and graziers for managing the moor for the environment as well as for livestock production.

It is also an appropriate time to address the issues of habitat degradation and loss in upland areas as new targets have been introduced by English Nature for the management of SSSI and other designated sites. The UK Biodiversity Action Plan has now been in existence for some years and targets have been set to improve the environmental status of UK BAP priority habitats and species. The issue of soil erosion can also be addressed by appropriate vegetation management.

The appropriate way of managing vegetation will usually be site specific and before formulating an appropriate management plan it is important to carry out a site assessment to establish the needs and requirements of the particular site. A management plan can then be produced that is appropriate to the site and recognises its particular needs and can be achieved with the resources available and in an appropriate timescale.

The guide outlines some examples of the vegetation management techniques that may be appropriate to the site recognising that some management techniques will not be appropriate or practical at all sites.

2. Individuals and Groups Concerned with Vegetation Management and their Objectives

Commoners / Graziers / Farmers

Commoners wish to ensure they can make acceptable returns from the land through production and the receipt of subsidies and grants e.g. Single Payment Scheme and Environmental Stewardship payments.

Commoners will wish to maintain land in Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition as part of cross compliance, in order to receive the Single Payment. Farmers entering into an Agri-Environment agreement are required to meet targets.

Landowners

Landowners may have the right to take up any common grazing not utilised by rights holders. They may retain the shooting rights and carry out vegetation management such as burning. Landowners will need to be party to any Agri-Environment agreement.

Conservation Agencies and Groups

The Conservation Agencies such as English Nature are keen to see the conservation status of upland habitats maintained and in some cases improved, particularly in sites that are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Special Protected Areas or Special Areas of Conservation. English Nature aims to get 95% of SSSI into favourable condition by 2010, with over 45% of SSSI currently considered to be in unfavourable condition.

English Nature have an advisory and monitoring role for these designated areas to ensure that they are maintained in favourable condition or working towards this. Conservation objectives may include reducing over-grazing to improve the diversity of the habitat and / or reducing under-grazing which can lead to the development of scrub and woodland and the loss of the moorland habitat. Proposed changes to management on a SSSI should always be first referred to English Nature.

Conservation groups may be concerned with protecting a particular species such as Black Grouse or Grey Partridge for example the Game Conservancy Trust are primarily concerned with the conservation of game species within the wider upland environment.

Game Shooting

The management of upland areas for shooting will be a primary aim. Management for shooting can be sympathetic to conservation and areas managed primarily for grouse shooting can have a good conservation status as the heather cover will have been maintained by appropriate burning and grazing.

Shooting tenants or others with a legal interest in shooting management will need to be party to any Agri-Environment agreement.

Walkers, Riders and other Recreational Users

Walkers and other users may have access to common land via Public Rights of Way or the land may be a designated open access area by the Countryside Agency. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 granted new public rights of access over mapped areas, with certain restrictions. Walkers are generally interested in the preservation of the landscape (of which the vegetation is a constituent part) and the scenic beauty of the area, as well as the maintenance, accessibility and safety of the footpath network and open access areas.

Recreational users can cause problems, primarily through lack of knowledge of the way the moor is managed, and the Federation aim to alleviate this through improving public understanding.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is the Agency responsible for the Single Payment Scheme. It is also the responsibility of DEFRA to ensure farmers adhere to the Statutory Management Requirements and Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition standards of Cross Compliance.

The Rural Development Service

The Rural Development Service is the agency of DEFRA responsible for Environmental Stewardship, the new scheme which replaces the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and Environmentally Sensitive Areas scheme, both of which are now closed to new applicants but will continue to operate until the terms of the current agreements expire.

The National Park Authorities

The Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority and North York Moors National Park Authority are a useful source of advice on Environmental Stewardship, moorland conservation and access issues.

Natural England

Natural England is a new agency which will replace English Nature, The Rural Development Service, and the landscape, access and recreation division of the Countryside Agency on 01 January 2007. The merger will mean less confusion for the customer as there will be a single Agency responsible for environmental advice and funding. The three groups already work in partnership and commoners and graziers will be kept informed of the changes by letter from the relevant Agencies.

3. The Importance of Vegetation Management

There are a number of reasons for looking closely at the way the vegetation of the moor is being managed and to consider formulating a vegetation management plan.

1. To meet legal commitments with regard to designated sites e.g. Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

English Nature aim to get 95% of SSSI into favourable management by 2010 and commoners and graziers have a part to play in achieving this. English Nature have a right to enforce management that will achieve favourable condition but prefer to work with commoners and graziers to formulate management agreements.

2. To ensure commoners and graziers are meeting cross compliance conditions to continue to receive the Single Payment.

The single payment can be withheld if commoners and graziers do not meet the conditions of cross compliance. It is the collective

responsibility of commoners and graziers to ensure that the conditions are met and payments continue to be made. Looking closely at the way vegetation is managed will identify areas where the conditions are not being met and a vegetation management plan will suggest changes that can be made.

3. To identify opportunities to increase profitability through Environmental Stewardship.

Many of the issues of vegetation management can be addressed through an Environmental Stewardship agreement. Through looking closely at how the vegetation is managed and suggesting how changes can be made through a management plan, commoners and graziers can identify how Environmental Stewardship can help them achieve their vegetation management objectives.

4. To assist with forward planning and budgets.

Once the issues of vegetation management have been addressed and commoners and graziers are sure they are meeting legal obligations, cross compliance and the option of entering into an Environmental Stewardship management agreement has been explored, commoners and graziers will be better placed to plan for the future.

4. The Process - How to Address the Issue of Vegetation Management

Vegetation Condition Survey / Desk Study

A survey will be the first step to addressing the issue of vegetation management. Specific types of survey are also required to accompany an Environmental Stewardship application. A basic survey - a Farm Environment Record (FER) - is required for an Entry Level Stewardship application and a more complex survey - a Farm Environment Plan (FEP) - is required for a Higher Level Stewardship application. Your Rural Development Service advisor will provide more information on the type of information required on application.

In general, the purpose of a vegetation survey is to identify the following..

- The way the land is currently being managed e.g. the current grazing practices and stocking rates, and details of any other management that may be taking place such as burning, bracken spraying etc.
- The current state of the vegetation at the site, its general health and if the current levels of grazing are appropriate.

The source of information will depend on the particular site and what the survey is to be used for. Advice is available from the following sources...

- English Nature, which hold much of the information required for SSSI sites and the areas surrounding them.

- Ecologists, the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, Agents and Advisors.

Interpretation of Survey/Study

Interpretation of the survey / study will reveal...

- Information on current grazing practices on the land such as sheep / hectare etc.
- If the land is being maintained in Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition and the cross-compliance requirements necessary to receive the Single Payment are being met.
- If any specific problems are evident such as over / under-grazing and an indication of the possible causes of such problems.
- Issues that could be addressed through applying for Environmental Stewardship payments (See guide to Environmental Stewardship)
- Any other issues such as presence of UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UKBAP) priority species and habitats, and details of other interests such as shooting and other recreation.

Although much of this can be carried out by the farmer, the help of English Nature, Ecologists, the FWAG, Agents and Advisors is recommended.

Action Plan

The interpretation can be used to determine any changes to management to improve the environmental status of the moor. An action plan looks at the best way of addressing any problems and identifies the best sources of funding.

Changes to management may be implemented through Environmental Stewardship. For example, some plans may propose reducing stocking rates and the best way of addressing this would be through Environmental Stewardship as it would compensate for reduced stocking rates.

Possible actions that may be taken might include...

- A reduction or increase in stocking rates in order to address problems of over / under-grazing.
- The introduction of an appropriate burning policy to regenerate heather and create an uneven age structure and therefore a more diverse range of habitats.
- Actions to achieve cross compliance.

The help of various Agencies, groups and individuals may again be required to formulate an action plan.

Implementation of Plan

Implementation of the plan will require full agreement (of farmers and others with rights to the land such as shooters) on the principles and detail of the plan. It is likely to require delegation of responsibility to individual commoners and graziers or individuals acting on their behalf and an appropriate timescale for action should be agreed upon.

5. Management Techniques

The guide provides brief descriptions of the type of management that may be carried out in order to increase the conservation value of the moor, but is intended as reference source only. It may be appropriate for the management plan to be drawn up with the Rural Development Service (or English Nature for SSSI) and thereafter administered under an Environmental Stewardship management agreement which would attract a payment.

The correct method and approach to management will depend on the site and the site cannot be treated as a whole for management purposes. Often a mosaic of vegetation types will be present and a management prescription will have to be decided upon often with the help of professional advisors.

Grazing

The intensity, timing and type of grazing will be the single factor that has the biggest effect on the health of the vegetation of the moor. The moor is dependent on an appropriate level and type of grazing as part of its management to prevent degradation through overgrazing or the appearance of scrub and woodland through undergrazing, but many upland heaths suffer from poor grazing management. The appropriate intensity, timing and type of grazing will very much depend on the site and this is something you should discuss with your agent or advisor.

Your advisor or agent may suggest the following measures...

1. **Exclude stock.** Stock exclusion is necessary, particularly on designated sites, where overgrazing has resulted in damage to heather habitats. Temporary exclusion may be sufficient to allow heather to regenerate naturally. In practice this can be difficult and is not always an option.
2. **Reduce stocking rates.** If overgrazing is a problem reducing the amount of stock on the land may permit vegetation (particularly heather) to recover. If stocking rates fall too low this can have a negative effect, encouraging the development of Bracken or the succession to scrub and woodland. Environmental stewardship payments can compensate for reduced grazing.
3. **Change timing of stocking.** Some vegetation types are more vulnerable to damage by grazing over winter and over-wintering stock elsewhere may prevent some damage.
4. **Change stock type.** Grazing by cattle can prevent less important species such as bracken becoming dominant over more important ones such as heather. A broader range of grazing stock will result in a more varied habitat. Care must be taken to avoid poaching and damage to heather.
5. **Increase shepherding.** Increased shepherding will ensure sheep are not overgrazing particular areas and will distribute the grazing pressure away from more sensitive to less sensitive areas of the moor.
6. **Appropriate winter feeding.** Care must be taken not to use centrally located feeders where the regular feeding of sheep can cause local overgrazing. Feed should ideally be placed either on bracken beds or moved regularly. Silage feeding should not be carried out on heather moor.

Burning

Burning is an important management technique. Correctly timed burning of certain vegetation types can result in vegetation that is more diverse in terms of age, composition and structure, which can support more wildlife (including game birds). Burning heather dominated areas on rotation will help encourage grouse and other birds which depend on different aged heather at different stages in their life cycle. Areas with patches of heather of various ages will be able to support more grouse. Stocking rates should be appropriate to ensure regeneration of heather in burnt areas. Burning can also encourage heather regeneration in grass dominated areas.

The burning programme is often managed by the owners or sporting tenants and commoners should liaise with them at all stages.

Burning is not always appropriate and can do more harm than good, for example, burning Bracken and Gorse. Bracken and Gorse are encouraged through burning as they are better at regenerating than weaker species such as heather, and so should not be burnt. Commercial grouse moor management often involves more frequent burning than is prescribed by agri-environment schemes. Your agent or advisor will be able to advise if burning should be introduced as part of your vegetation management.

The heather and grass burning legislation and codes of practice apply to burning activities on the moors. The codes of practice are currently under review and members of the Federation of Commoners and Moorland Graziers are representing your interests in the review process.

Cutting/ Rolling

Cutting heather is an option but is generally not as effective as burning in terms of creating heather of an uneven age structure. Cutting can be used to control rushes and gorse and may be supported by Environmental Stewardship. Cutting and rolling are effective in the control of bracken. Care must be taken to avoid archaeological features. Your agent or advisor will be able to advise if cutting or rolling should be introduced as part of your vegetation management.

Chemical Treatment

The chemical treatment of Bracken is effective but is expensive and time consuming and therefore usually supported by Environmental Stewardship payments. Chemical treatment is also used for the control of rushes. Your agent or advisor will be able to advise if chemical treatment should be introduced as part of your vegetation management.

6. Sources of Information and Advice

The Federation of Yorkshire Commoners and Moorland Graziers

Address: The Administrator
2 Woodland Dell
Hebden Bridge
West Yorkshire
HX7 6NJ

Telephone: 01422 845399

English Nature

Address: Northminster House
Peterborough
PE1 1UA

Telephone: 01733 455000

Local Offices: North and East Yorkshire Team

Genesis 1
University Road

Asquith House
Leyburn Business Park

Heslington
York
YO10 52Q

Harmby Road
Leyburn
DL8 5QA

Telephone 01904 435500

01969 623447

Local Office: Humber and Pennines Team

Bull Ring House
Northgate
Wakefield
West Yorkshire
WF1 3BJ

Telephone: 01924 334500

Website: www.english-nature.org.uk

Specific web pages: www.english-nature.org.uk/special/sssi

Information on managing an SSSI, SSSI details such as maps, reasons for designation, operations requiring English Nature consent, English Nature views on the management of the SSSI, condition assessment etc

www.english-nature.org.uk/pubs/Handbooks/

'The Upland Management Handbook'
(downloadable) - Information on appropriate
stocking rates and management techniques

Publications: The Upland Management Handbook

**Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs -
Rural Payments Agency**

Address (local office): Alverton Court
Crosby Road
Northallerton
DL6 1AD

Telephone:
-main switchboard: 0845 605 6509
-local office: 01609 773751
-single payment scheme helpline: 0845 603 7777

Website: www.rpa.gov.uk

Specific web pages:
www.defra.gov.uk/farm/capreform/index/htm
information on the Single Farm Payment

Publications: 'Single Payment Scheme: Information for
farmers and growers'
'Single Payment Scheme: Cross compliance
handbook for England'

**Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs -
Rural Development Service**

Address (Yorkshire and the Humber Office): Government Buildings
Otley Road
Lawnwood
Leeds
LS16 5QT

Telephone:
-main switchboard: 0113 2303750
-Environmental Stewardship helpline: 0845 6024096

Website: www.defra.gov.uk/rds

Specific web pages:
www.defra.gov.uk/erdp/schemes/es/default/htm
Information on Environmental
Stewardship

Publications: 'Entry Level Stewardship
Handbook'

Handbook' 'Higher Level Stewardship

'Higher Level Stewardship: Farm Environment Plan: Guidance handbook'

Countryside Agency

Address (Yorkshire and the Humber Office): 4th Floor Victoria Wharf
Sovereign Street
Leeds
LS1 4BS

Telephone:
-Switchboard: 01242 533222
-Yorkshire and the Humber Office: 0113 246 9222

Website: www.countryside.gov.uk

Game Conservancy Trust

Address: Fordingbridge
Hampshire
SP6 1EF

Telephone: 01425 652381

Website: www.gct.org.uk

U.K Biodiversity Action Plan

Website: www.ukbap.org.uk

The website provides links to local action plans and species and habitat action plans such as the Upland Heathland Habitat Action Plan. The plans state specific objectives, targets and actions for each area, habitat or species.

Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority

Address: Yorebridge House Colvend
Bainbridge Hebden Road
Leyburn Grassington
North Yorkshire West Yorkshire
DL8 3EE BD23 5LB

Telephone: 0870 1666333

Website: www.yorkshiredales.org.uk

North York Moors National Park Authority

Address: The Old Vicarage

Bondgate
Helmsley
York
YO62 5BP

Telephone: 01439 770657

Website: www.moors.uk.net