

Labour Rural Research Group (LRRG)

Labour for our rural communities

Dame Angela Eagle
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

19th August 2026

Working together on a new approach to wildfire management

Dear Angela,

We are writing as the Labour Rural Research Group (LRRG) to DEFRA and MHCLG to suggest that this is an opportune moment for the Government to radically strengthen the UK's approach to climate adaptation and wildfire management.

We recognise the work already being undertaken across government to improve wildfire resilience. In June, the Government announced almost £100 million of investment in fire and rescue assets – the largest upgrade in almost 20 years – alongside specialist firefighters positioned in key areas and training in approaches including tactical burning. We welcome these steps and the effort being made to learn from international experience.

However, we believe the changing nature of the risk requires us to go much further, and we believe there is an opportunity to work together across government – with farmers, land managers, fire and rescue services, local authorities, the devolved nations, environmental organisations and rural communities – in response to this summer's atrocities to rapidly move towards a genuinely integrated approach to wildfire risk.

Recent events demonstrate why this matters. As you know, the UK has experienced an extraordinary run of heat and dry weather this year. The Met Office reports that 2026 is the first year in the UK weather record in which temperatures of 35°C or above have been recorded in May, June and July, while England experienced its warmest June on record.

The consequences have extended well beyond heat. By late July, Government reporting showed record soil moisture deficits for the time of year across several parts of England, very low river flows and reservoir storage around 7.4% below the long-term average. The Environment Agency reported that wildfires were occurring around

the country, while prolonged dry conditions were contributing to increased field fires and putting further pressure on agriculture. Our farmers are reporting low yields, with winter feed already being used in many parts of the country to sustain livestock. Other public services have also been severely impacted, notably our hospitals where staff are dealing with record patient numbers in poorly adapted buildings.

These events should encourage us to consider wildfire as part of the UK's wider climate adaptation challenge, rather than principally as an emergency response issue. Last year, a major wildfire on the North York Moors which covered 25 square kilometres and burnt for 40 days – severely impacting the farming, business and tourism industries – exposed a lack of clarity towards wildfires across government. Without a named minister in charge, there was a vacuum which meant that the people who contributed to the mammoth local resilience effort – without which lives would have almost certainly been lost – went unrecognised; that their contribution was overlooked; and that they were ultimately left out of pocket. This must change.

We would, therefore, like to encourage DEFRA and MHCLG to consider the following:

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First, put prevention alongside response at the heart of wildfire policy.

Investment in fire and rescue capacity will remain essential. However, prevention and preparedness need to be treated as equally important parts of the wildfire cycle. This means considering how vegetation, forests, agricultural land and other landscapes can be managed to reduce the likelihood and severity of fires before they begin. LRRG members have previously made unsuccessful arguments for flood prevention grants to be extended to cover wildfire risk.

Second, make rural land management part of the wildfire strategy.

Farmers and land managers have an important role to play in creating more fire-resilient landscapes. Appropriate grazing, water capture, vegetation management, forestry practices, fuel breaks and other forms of land management could all have a role where they are suitable to local circumstances.

There should be an honest review of the current ban on controlled burning, taking in new academic research. Remote upland areas such as peatland moors which can hold huge fuel loads need particularly sensitive land management.

We would, therefore, welcome a discussion about how existing agricultural and environmental schemes could do more to support land management that reduces wildfire risk, including considering wildfire resilience as a public benefit where appropriate. This should be developed with farmers and land managers rather than

imposed upon them. Rural communities are essential partners in delivering effective adaptation.

Third, develop a stronger national wildfire risk intelligence system.

We understand that the European Commission is strengthening the European Forest Fire Information System and satellite-based monitoring, alongside risk modelling and early-warning tools. The UK Government should consider whether it and the devolved nations have the data, mapping and forecasting capability needed to identify wildfire risk at sufficient spatial resolution, combining weather, drought, vegetation, land-use and other relevant information. This could give fire and rescue services, local authorities, farmers, land managers and communities better information about where risks are building and enable earlier preventative action.

Fourth, integrate wildfire into climate adaptation policy.

The experience of 2026 demonstrates how drought, extreme heat, agricultural impacts, water stress and wildfire risk can occur simultaneously. The Government's drought reporting has already shown the interconnected nature of these pressures.

We, therefore, believe wildfire resilience should be considered more explicitly within the UK's wider climate adaptation framework, rather than being treated as an isolated emergency services responsibility. We believe that stronger flooding mitigation measures, including streamlining planning rules so farmers can quickly build on-farm water storage reservoirs, could achieve multiple objectives simultaneously. Last weekend's announcement goes a long way to addressing some of the farming industry's immediate asks, but one-off policy announcements must always be integrated into wider climate responses, and should be as consistent as possible across the devolved nations.

Fifth, strengthen community preparedness.

Across Europe, we have seen greater emphasis starting to be placed on public awareness. We believe there is scope to consider how communities in areas at higher risk could be supported with better information about wildfire risk, prevention, emergency planning, evacuation and the protection of homes, businesses and critical infrastructure.

Finally, ensure that recovery reduces future risk.

Post-fire recovery should consider not simply how to restore what existed before, but how landscapes and communities can become more resilient to future extreme weather. Post-fire restoration must be connected to climate resilient ecosystems.

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We do not believe that these points require the Government to start from scratch. There is already significant expertise across DEFRA, MHCLG, the Environment Agency, Natural England, the Forestry Commission, fire and rescue services, local government, academia, farmers and land managers. Indeed, the Government's recent investment in specialist wildfire capability provides an excellent foundation on which to build.

Rather, our proposal is that your departments should bring these strands together and consider developing **a UK Integrated Wildfire Risk Management Strategy**, working across Government, across the devolved nations and with the rural sector. Such a strategy could establish a **clear national framework for prevention, preparedness, response and recovery**; identify the roles of different departments and agencies; examine how agricultural and environmental policy can contribute to prevention; improve national risk mapping and early warning; and set out how communities and land managers can be supported. We believe the Strategy should be **developed and led by a named minister in the Government** who is responsible for wildfire prevention and recovery.

The events of this summer should not simply prompt us to prepare for the next wildfire season. They should prompt us to ask what kind of rural landscapes, land management systems and emergency capabilities we need for the climate we are now experiencing. We believe there is an opportunity for the Government to seize this moment and make wildfire resilience an important part of a more ambitious, preventative and locally grounded programme of UK climate adaptation.

We would be very keen to work constructively with the Government on this. The LRRG routinely brings together different perspectives from across rural Britain as part of its research, including the practical experience of farmers, land managers and rural communities. We would, therefore, welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you and your officials, and to work together on how the UK can learn from best practice emerging across Europe while developing an approach that works for our own rural communities.

Yours sincerely,
Labour Rural Research Group (LRRG)

CC: Rt Hon Angela Rayner, Secretary of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government

The LRRG represents over 40 backbench Labour MPs who are passionate about creating better policy for our rural communities.