



Working to Protect the New Forest

Presentment to September 2026 Verderers Court

Official Verderer, Verderers and the members of public attending court today, I am Sarah Nield, Chair of the New Forest Association (NFA).

I wish to extend the Associations thanks to all those who helped to control and then extinguish the fire that has devastated a large area south of the A31 around Brackley Holmes, Brackley Bottom and part of Bratley Wood. Many have been involved but particular thanks must go to local commoners, the firefighters, Forestry England and to the volunteers who sustained and guided the frontline. It was combined efforts that prevented wider devastation and has given the Forest a good chance of recovery. There are no doubt lessons to be learnt for the future in how to tackle Forest wildfires which, with climate change ever more evident, are a growing risk. We thus welcome the formation of a multi-agency Recovery Co-ordination Group, with the contribution of this court, to take that learning forward.

Environmental experts, including those from Forestry England, Natural England, New Forest Association and the New Forest Biodiversity Forum, are beginning to assess the habitat, wildlife and other ecological damage as well as what measures (if any) can help support recovery and minimise the risk of future fires. On the open heath and in the mires, nature has already begun the long recovery process encouraged by the recent welcome rain. Livestock too are playing their part in suppressing more vigorous new growth. The impact on the Ancient and Ornamental woodland at Bratley is more worrying and it will take time to assess how badly it has suffered and whether at least some recovery and regeneration is possible.

In looking to future management, keeping fuel for fires (e.g. heather and other vegetation) in check as well as managing fire risk from recreation is going to be key. Ensuring adequate stock levels, controlled burning and effective enforcement of controls over open fires & barbecues (e.g. PSPOs) all play their part. Scarcely believable have been incidents of continued use of barbecues and fires as well as evidence of arson. Of course, this court and Forestry England already work together to manage fire risk. This fire has demonstrated just how important this work is and we urge them to continue and, where possible, develop further effective fire control measures.

Sarah Nield