

Environmental Standard Operating Procedure

ESOP Name	Fen Mowing
ESOP Number	25
Revision Date	22/02/2024
Related ESOPs	2 Biosecurity 24 Oil and fuel usage



Aim

The Broads fens have unique and important plant communities, which in turn provide specialist habitat for many birds and invertebrates. Fen habitat requires periodic vegetation removal to keep it in an open and healthy condition and prevent scrub invasion. Working practices aim to achieve this whilst avoiding damage to this sensitive habitat.

This standard procedure aims to provide a methodology to ensure that fen plant material is cut and removed in a manner that promotes the maintenance and/or restoration of the fen to an open condition.

Standard Procedure – Hand Mowing

- Within a site, small areas to be cut on rotation to reduce catastrophic impacts from large scale vegetation removal.
- Uncut areas to be retained within the cut compartment, acting as refuge areas for invertebrates and small mammals.
- Vegetation to be cut and either stacked in rows for burning (burning only to proceed if ground is damp/wet), or raked into habitat piles.

- Habitat piles to be situated on banks surrounding the fen and not within fen itself. Small piles can be left within the fen for invertebrates & birds.
- Bonfires should never be placed directly on the fen surface; tin sheets or fire sledge should be used and where possible situated on perimeter banks, with ash spread thinly and away from dyke edges unless otherwise specified.
- Fire sledge should be regularly moved to avoid heat scorching into the peat. Sledge should be moved using hand power winches where suitable trees are in situ or using the iron horse.
- The iron horse is a tracked vehicle and care should be taken to avoid tracking over the same ground and over very wet soft peat.
- When burning in rows, ground conditions should be wet to encourage a quick flash burn of cut material.
- Ensure breaks exist between cut and standing material to prevent fire from spreading. Good practice to have a water pump on site.
- Routine mowing to be avoided within the bird breeding season (March-August); good practice to check areas for nests before mowing. Mark locations of nests found and leave marked areas undisturbed.
- Areas with a high density of tussocks may require use of brushcutter so that tussocks can be avoided.
- Standard procedure for use of the fen harvester to cut fen and reedbed is detailed in [ESOP 13](#).

Consultation

- Further information in [ESOP 13](#).
- Natural England will need to be notified of annual routine work programme if site is under Countryside Stewardship or ELMS.

Risk Assessment

Hazard	Initial Risk			Controls / Safeguards / Precautions	Revised Risk		
	S	L	R		S	L	R
Damage to vegetation community either through catastrophic removal of large areas of fen habitat in one operation and/or cutting in inappropriate conditions.	4	4	C	Sites to be split into smaller areas and cut on rotation. Areas to be left within compartment for habitat continuity, where possible linking to other uncut areas at boundary/edge. Cutting to be timed to maximise seeding of flowering plants and avoid high water levels, especially if saw sedge (<i>Cladium</i>) present.	4	1	B
Removal of all invertebrate habitat	4	3	C	Uncut areas to be left within compartments for refuge. Amount and location will be site specific but should ensure maximum edge to cut area ratio. Can incorporate areas that would be difficult to cut.	4	1	B
Cutting or damaging tussocks	3	3	B	Raise cutting height and/or avoid tussocky areas	3	1	A
Disturbance to breeding birds	4	5	C	Mowing timed to avoid majority of breeding season; operator checks and awareness of possible nest sites.	4	1	B
Damage to fen substrate	4	5	C	Produce a plan for the site including a track plan to avoid repeated tracking over the same area. Limit the number of people walking over the same area on soft peat sites and avoid operating in very wet conditions	4	2	B

Matrix

		LIKELIHOOD				
		Very unlikely	Unlikely	Moderately likely	Likely	Very likely
SEVERITY		1	2	3	4	5
Low (minimal, short-term disturbance levels and negligible damage to native habitats.)	1	A	A	A	A	A
Medium (moderate, short-term disturbance levels, some damage to native habitats/species. Regenerates quickly.)	2	A	A	A	B	B
High (high disturbance levels over a longer period and displacement of species. Damage to native habitats. Significant time to regenerate)	3	A	B	B	C	C
Very High (Long-term disturbance with displacement/death of species. Significant damage to native habitats that takes a significant time to regenerate.)	4	B	B	C	C	C

RISK	
A	OK. Work to provisions in risk assessment
B	Proceed with caution. Dynamically review risks.
C	Cancel task. Approach project in a different way.