FACTSHEET

Heather Cutting

Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) cutting is carried out for three reasons:

- As an alternative to burning to control mature heather
- To introduce fire breaks
- To supply other sites with heather bales (for grip and gully blocking) and brash (to help stabilise vegetation) – see the *Heather Bale Dams* and *Bare Peat Re-vegetation* Factsheets

Ideally all three of these goals will be achieved in a single operation.

Bales are composed of long-stalked heather, whereas brash is double-chopped before being bagged into dumpy bags of approximately 0.73m^3 (90cm x 90cm x 90cm). Various techniques for cutting can be used, including a modified double-chop forage harvester (*Figure 1*) and a Uni-mog mounted flail mower. Generally, stems more than 0.5cm diameter should be flailed rather than cut. The cutter should sit on a floating mechanism to prevent scouring of the ground. The nature of the terrain (slope, access, the presence of gullies and rocks, and so forth) will dictate the specific machinery to be used.

The area to be cut depends on the length of the heather but an initial estimate would be 150 to 200 bags per hectare, which would be the minimum that could cost-effectively be undertaken. Generally, 200 bags can be cut in one day.

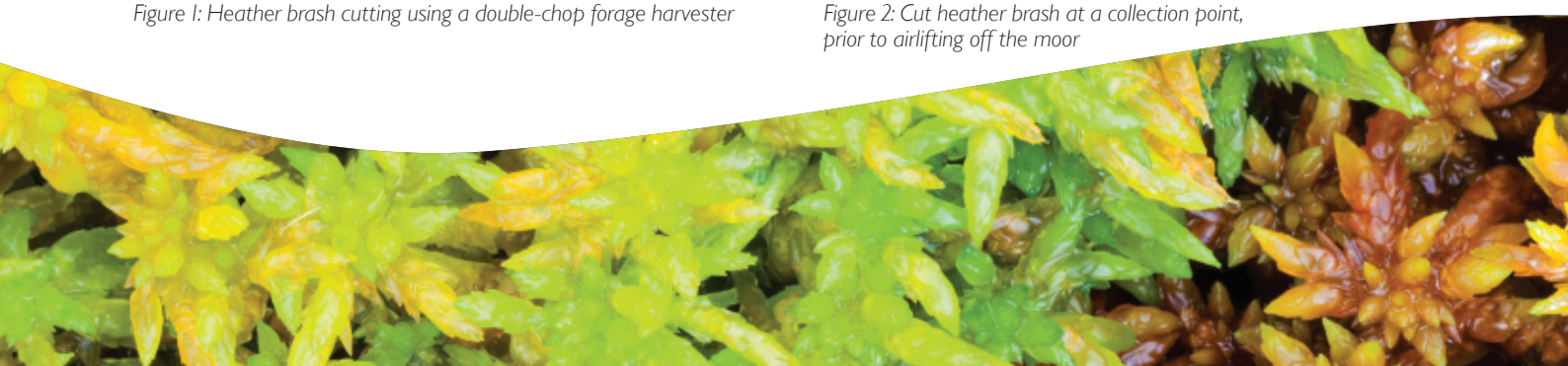
Brash and bales are generally airlifted off-site to the roadhead in order to minimise vehicular disturbance to the ground. For this reason dumpy bags are also used to hold bales (two bales in each bag). The airlift process is most efficient when the bags can be grouped into holding areas of twenty to thirty bags (*Figure 2*). The machinery described above can fill between two and four bags at a time; these can then be driven to the holding areas. Cutting is planned so that the holding areas are close to the cuts, and vehicles do not need to repeatedly drive over the same area.

Heather should be dry and unfrozen when harvested. Frozen stems are hard to cut, while wet material is unlikely to dry within the dumpy bags, making it prone to composting. Furthermore, under wet conditions vehicles are more likely to tear up the ground.

Heather brash is only sourced from donor sites over 200m in altitude and is ideally cut during late autumn or winter, when the seed would set naturally, in order to ensure the highest amount of heather seed is present. It will also contain propagules of mosses and lichens and mycorrhizal fungi, all of which are important components of moorland ecology. Other species such as bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) may also be caught up in the cutting operation (although all reasonable steps are taken to minimise this). For this reason, brash and bales destined for removal to other sites must undergo Moors for the Future's 'Brash Passport' system of checks before acceptance.

Figure 1: Heather brash cutting using a double-chop forage harvester

Figure 2: Cut heather brash at a collection point, prior to airlifting off the moor



THE MOORS FOR THE FUTURE BRASH PASSPORT SYSTEM

The Moors for the Future Brash Passport System is designed to ensure the heather is sourced and harvested responsibly and to prevent the transfer of undesirable species and pathogens between sites. The steps include:

- Obtaining SSSI Consent from Natural England
- Seeking information about archaeological features on the donor site and (where these are present) permission to proceed
- Specific surveys for heather beetles and plant pathogens such as *Phytophthora sp.*
- Confirmation whether there are any known pests, such as ticks, or diseases, such as cryptosporidiosis ('bulgy eye disease')
- A robust method statement from the cutting contractor, describing how the heather will be cut and transported in such a way as to ensure maximum purity of material and minimum impact upon the ground

The presence of heather beetles is graded according to a points-based system which allows the owner or the recipient site to make an informed decision as to whether or not he or she will accept the heather. For example, he or she may decide that the presence of low levels of heather beetles on the donor site is not an issue if they are already present on the recipient site in significant quantities.

Any new issues that become apparent during cutting can result in a re-evaluation of the passport status of the donor site, which could result in rejection of the heather supply, if necessary.

*Figure 3: Even-aged stands of vigorous heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), like the one shown, are ideal for harvesting for heather brash*

MoorLIFE2020

This factsheet is one of a series produced by the MoorLIFE 2020 project. A Moors for the Future Partnership project in the EU designated South Pennine Moors Special Area of Conservation. Delivered by the Peak District National Park Authority as the lead and accountable body (the Coordinating Beneficiary). On the ground delivery is being undertaken largely by the Moors for the Future staff team with works also undertaken by staff of the National Trust High Peak and Marsden Moor Estates, the RSPB Dove Stone and Pennine Prospects (the Associated Beneficiaries).

www.moorsforthefuture.org.uk

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Moors for the Future Partnership
The Moorland Centre, Fieldhead, Edale, Hope Valley S33 7ZA
t: 01629 816581 e: moors@peakdistrict.gov.uk