# WRITTEN STATEMENT

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# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE** | **Grass fires** |
| **DATE** | **03 July 2018** |
| **BY** | **Alun Davies, Cabinet Secretary for Local Government and Public Services** |

I would like to update Members on the recent outbreaks of grass fires in Wales.

Extended spells of hot and dry weather always increase the risk of fire, especially in areas of uncultivated grassland, moorland and forestry. Recent days have been no exception, with significant incidents from Anglesey to the Rhondda requiring a prolonged firefighting response. There have been many more small fires which have been quickly and easily dealt with.

Most of these fires appear to have been started deliberately. I am sure Members will join me in condemning this behaviour in the strongest possible terms. Grass fires devastate the environment, kill wildlife and livestock, threaten homes and businesses and put the lives of firefighters and others at risk. Starting them deliberately is not funny or clever – it is dangerous and idiotic. Those caught doing so face prosecution for the very serious offence of arson. They can expect a substantial fine or time in prison, and a criminal record for the rest of their lives.

It is clearly far better to prevent such fires than to fight them. That has been our focus since Easter 2015, when we saw almost 1,500 grass fires in a month. The Fire Service has worked intensively with the police, local authorities, schools, farmers and others to divert and deter people from fire-setting, and to develop other ways of reducing risk such as better land management. That has unquestionably worked. The number of grass fires fell by almost half in the first year of this programme – and, despite recent outbreaks, this year could well still see the lowest number of grass fires on record.

But we can never eliminate the problem altogether. Grass fires are too easy to start, especially in weather like this. So we have also supported the Fire Service to invest in the specialist equipment and training firefighters need to tackle grass fires swiftly and effectively. In particular, South Wales FRS – which faces by far the greatest risk – is one of the best-equipped brigades in the UK, with an expertise that is recognised internationally. Its crews were among the first to be deployed to help Greater Manchester FRS to tackle the Saddleworth Moor fire, without compromising the Service’s ability to respond to incidents closer to home.

Despite all that, fighting grass fires remains challenging and dangerous. Sometimes, the safest and most effective way of tackling such a fire is to contain it and allow it to burn out. To those in the vicinity this might seem like slow progress. They should be assured that any fire which threatens life or property will receive a more aggressive response, and that protecting public safety is the Fire Service’s top priority at all times.

It is also important to remember that most of our firefighters are not full-time, and in rural areas none of them are. They are called in from their homes or workplaces as they are needed, and at times like these the demands on them can be severe. So can the demands on their employers, who can experience significant disruption to their businesses when on-call firefighters among their staff are called upon. I would like to thank them for their support in keeping our communities safe.

The forecast indicates little change in the weather for the next seven to ten days, which means the risk of grass fires remains high. We are keeping the situation under constant review, but, I am confident that our fire services have all they need to manage this risk effectively.