# Agriculture Minister dismisses Ulster Farmers' Union claims on environmental protections



Stormont's Agriculture Minister, Andrew Muir, has publicly dismissed claims made by the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU), labelling them as "bizarre". His remarks came during a session of the Assembly's Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs committee, following the UFU's criticism of a report by the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP). This report proposed an increase in designated environmental protected areas in Northern Ireland, a suggestion that has sparked considerable debate amid ongoing wildfires affecting the region.

Since the beginning of last week, firefighters in Northern Ireland have responded to over 200 wildfires, with significant activity noted in the upland areas, particularly the Mourne Mountains. In a recent statement, the UFU has asserted that environmental designations are hindering farmers' ability to manage these lands effectively, which they argue leads to uncontrolled growth of vegetation such as heather and gorse, thus creating conditions conducive to wildfires.

Addressing these concerns, Muir acknowledged the OEP's findings but asserted the importance of protecting Northern Ireland's designated sites, which he referred to as "jewels in our crown". He expressed his determination to collaborate with officials to address the recommendations laid out in the report: “Protected sites in Northern Ireland are jewels in our crown. They are something that we should value… It saddens me that people would view it as otherwise,” he stated. Muir reaffirmed his commitment to improving upland management practices and enhancing ecological conditions across the protected areas.

In contrast, the UFU's deputy president, John McLenaghan, has urged the government to take cognisance of the growing risk of wildfires linked to these protected designations. He remarked on the "devastating" impact of recent wildfires which have taken a toll on habitats in regions such as the Mourne Mountains, the north west, and County Antrim. The UFU's position is that the restrictions imposed on farmers prevent necessary land management practices, such as controlled burning and regulated grazing, leading to an accumulation of vegetation that exacerbates wildfire risk. McLenaghan highlighted the long-term consequences of the fires: “Habitats have been completely destroyed, and the damage will be felt for years to come.”

The ongoing debate highlights the tension between environmental protection initiatives and agricultural management practices in Northern Ireland. Each side presents a compelling argument regarding the best approach to managing upland landscapes, with wildfires underscoring the urgency of the discussions.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/emergency-incident/northern-ireland-wildfires-ufu-and-daera-minister-andrew-muir-in-blame-game-over-cause-of-wildfires-5076080> - This article corroborates the debate between the Ulster Farmers' Union and Agriculture Minister Andrew Muir regarding the cause of wildfires in Northern Ireland. It highlights the UFU's claims about environmental designations hindering land management and Muir's defense of protected sites.
* <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/news/we-all-have-responsibility-prevent-devastating-wildfires> - This statement from DAERA Minister Andrew Muir underscores the urgency of preventing wildfires and emphasizes the importance of collective responsibility in managing the countryside. It also details the response efforts by various agencies.
* <https://www.breakingnews.ie/ireland/people-starting-wildfires-risk-being-charged-with-manslaughter-muir-1749694> - This article documents Minister Andrew Muir's warnings about the risks of starting wildfires, including potential manslaughter charges. It also reports on the scale and impact of recent wildfires across Northern Ireland.
* <https://www.vacourts.gov/courts/scv/rulesofcourt.pdf> - While not directly relevant to the article's content, this source provides general information on legal procedures and could be tangentially linked to potential legal discussions around land management and environmental protection.
* <https://www.courts.michigan.gov/492eca/siteassets/publications/benchbooks/evidence/evidbb.pdf> - Similar to the Virginia courts document, this Michigan courts evidence benchbook provides legal context but does not directly support the specific claims about Northern Ireland wildfires or environmental policies.