

SAFETY FIRST

Fire alert for farmers

Fire service issues advice for the summer ahead

Farmers are being urged to take steps to reduce the risk of fire, including from arson attacks, amid concerns that tinder-dry conditions are putting the countryside at risk.

The advice has come from Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service, which works hard with the farming community, including the NFU, to help farmers keep their premises fire safe.

The service often sees an increase in fires during the summer months. Crews have attended more than 350 farm related fires since 2016, with most taking place between June and September.

Around 30% of the farm fires attended by crews were started deliberately.

Station Commander Pete Jones, the service's arson and farming liaison officer, said: "Farming is an important part of the local economy and it is vital that we do our bit to keep it thriving.

'SIGNIFICANT IMPACT'

"The summer months see our crews called to many farm related fires, often involving stacks and damaging hundreds of acres of land.

"This has a significant impact on those farmers, both with lost crops and potentially buildings and animals. These fires are often started deliberately and will keep our crews away from other emergencies for hours, or even days.

"We also see fires involving farm machinery, like combines. These can rapidly spread to crops and escalate quickly, tying firefighters up for hours.

"Fortunately, we often have the support of the local farming community, who help us by making fire breaks, assisting with water supply using bowsers, and helping us to locate the incident faster by using the what3words app.

"We work proactively with farmers to provide safety advice about fire risk assessments, stacking bales safely and reducing the risk of arson on their businesses."

One key step farmers can take to help ensure fire crews can respond to an emergency rapidly is to use what3words. Fires can occur in large areas of open fields, making incidents difficult to find. Farm staff can help by providing a what3words location when reporting a fire, so crews can pinpoint the location.



TOP TIPS FOR PREVENTING FIRES

Considerations when choosing where to stack bales:

- Select a site away from any potential fire hazards and sources of ignition.
- Provide sufficient space to allow farm vehicles room to manoeuvre.
- If close to a fence or boundary, assess whether the stack needs to be fenced off.
- If there is public access to the field via a footpath etc, consider providing signs to warn people to keep away.
- Do not build stacks over underground services such as gas pipes or water mains and fire hydrants.
- Do not work or build a stack under or within 10 metres of overhead power lines.

Other precautions when storing stacks:

- Multiple stacks should be sited at least 10 metres away from each other and any nearby buildings to prevent fire spread, as well as allow safe manoeuvring between them. However, you may wish to consult your insurance company and local authority for advice.
- Where multiple stacks are sited together they should, if possible, be in line with the prevailing wind.
- Avoid siting stacks near public access and roads as these are vulnerable to fires from discarded cigarettes, littered glass and deliberate arson.
- Ensure combustible materials are stored well away.
- Keep bale elevator engines free of straw and other debris.
- Do not allow smoking near stacks.
- Be aware of spontaneous combustion.
- Do not carry out any works near a stack that could cause a fire.

A GROWING FUTURE FOR HEMP

Hemp is a crop with a great future according to John Barrett, director of Sentry Farms, who has recently begun cultivating cannabis sativa for hemp fibres. Having begun with a 20-hectare plot, he plans to plant a further 200 hectares next year. "We have been looking for an alternative in order to widen our rotation away from traditional crops," he said.

"I see hemp as a light land crop. However, we are planning on trying some on heavier soils this year. It has great rooting properties which means it has resilience, but does not like compaction."

Hemp is a distinct strain of cannabis sativa that is grown specifically for industrial use including biodegradable plastics, textiles and biofuel. Although the same species as plants grown for cannabis, hemp has lower concentrations of the psychoactive component THC, which is a controlled substance.

John was one of the speakers discussing its potential, and regulatory barriers that need to be overcome, at an Agri-TechE event 'Farmer to Pharma' on 12 May.

Dr Belinda Clarke of Agri-TechE said: "The potential for this crop remains largely untapped across Europe. The regulatory environment needs to catch up with the pace of innovation around breeding, processing and husbandry."



John Barrett of Sentry