

Plant Health and the Natural Environment

Policy Summary



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Policy Summary

1 Background

Plant pests and pathogens (herein referred to as pests) can have a devastating impact on plant health and plant populations. Within the agricultural, horticultural and forestry sectors there is growing awareness of these risks, but the potential impact plant pests might have on the natural environment, is rarely considered. For example, considerable resources are currently being spent on habitat restoration and creation, but it is unclear if the risks posed by plant pests in these activities are considered. In addition, there is a lack of knowledge about what the plant pest risk is to Scottish habitats. The natural environment underpins Scotland's landscapes, biodiversity, rural industries and recreational activities. It is therefore important that the risks posed to our natural environment by plant pests are understood and appropriate measures implemented to reduce these risks.

2 Key Research Questions

1. How aware are those involved in habitat restoration and creation of the risks posed by plant pests?
2. Which plant pests could threaten Scottish moorlands?
3. What are the underlying principles required for assessing and reducing plant pest risks in the natural environment?

3 Research Undertaken

- Results from a questionnaire with responses from 224 participants was used to better understand the awareness of those involved in habitat restoration and habitat creation of the risks posed by plant pests.
- Using Defra's Plant Health Risk Register and the UK's National Vegetation Classification a list of all the plant pests that could be hosted by plants occurring on Scottish moorlands was collated.
- In discussion with stakeholders, a framework was developed to a) help prioritise plants/habitats for monitoring of plant health and b) provide activities to promote plant health in the natural environment.

4 Main Findings

- Those involved in habitat restoration and creation:
 - had misconceptions about the relative risks posed by different potential sources of plant pests.
 - often didn't have risk assessments in place for plant pests.
 - didn't always check if biosecurity protocols were followed.
 - rarely had someone within their organisation responsible for biosecurity.
- The Plant Health Risk Register lists 161 pests that could be hosted by vascular plants occurring on Scottish moorlands.
- The framework (see figure 1) provided:
 - 3 methods to prioritise which plants/habitats to monitor for pests.
 - 5 activities to promote plant health in the natural environment.

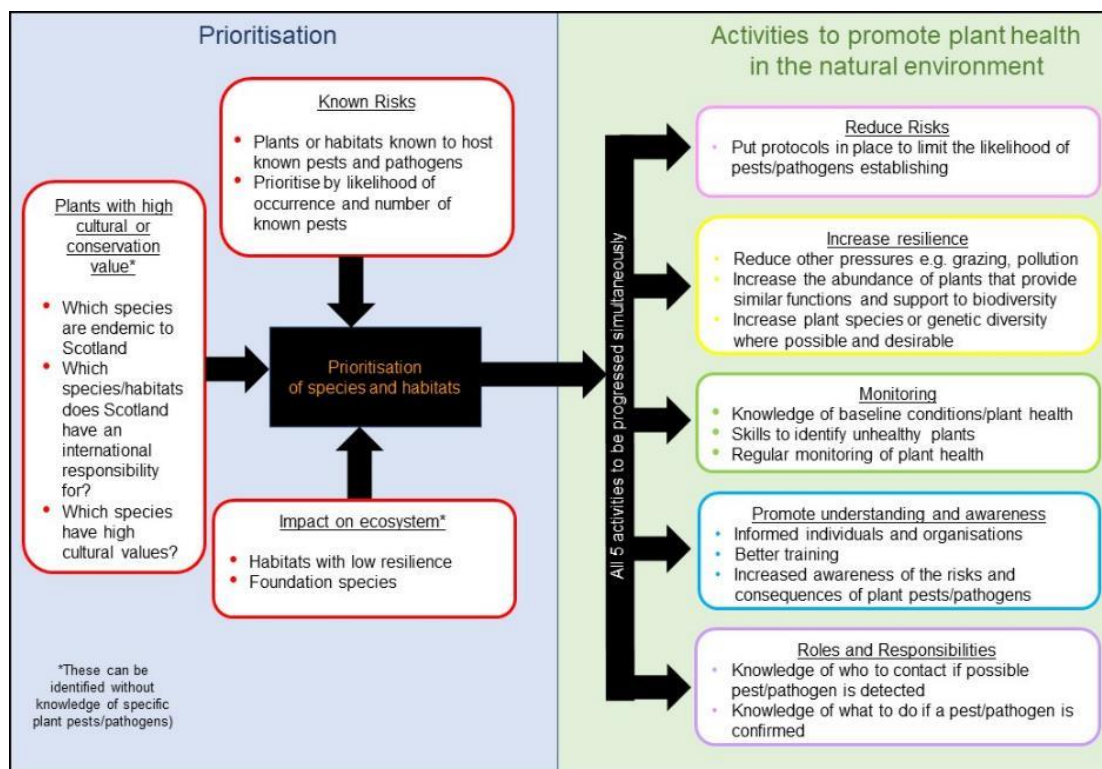


Figure 1. A framework for assessing and reducing plant health risks in the natural environment.

5 Recommendations

- **Roles and responsibility for plant health in the natural environment need to be clarified.**
 - There should be clear lines of responsibility and communication for plant health in the natural environment.
 - A standard operating procedure is required for identification of, and response to, plant pests in the environment.
- **A procedure for monitoring plant health in the natural environment should be established.**
 - Plant health in the natural environment should be monitored regularly e.g. it could be included during habitat condition surveys and/or monitoring of habitat restoration/creation success.
 - The development of something similar to [TreeAlert](#) for non-tree plants would enable the general public to report unhealthy plants in the natural environment.
- **Habitat restoration and creation projects should include risk assessments for plant pests and biosecurity protocols.**
 - All habitat restoration and creation activities should be required to have an assessment of the risk of accidentally introducing plant pests, together with biosecurity guidance/best practice to mitigate the identified risks.
 - Organisations involved in habitat creation/restoration should check that their staff/contractors follow the agreed biosecurity protocols and have a named individual responsible for biosecurity.
 - Further advice on developing risk assessments and biosecurity protocols for plant pest is required by stakeholders within the natural environment sector.
- **There should be greater awareness of the risks to natural environment from plant pests.**
 - The example of numbers of potential pests that could impact Scottish moorlands, collated in this report, could be used as an awareness raising exercise to highlight the risks.

- **Modification of the Plant Health Risk Register (PHRR) would enable it to be of greater use to stakeholders.**
 - If the PHRR and the associated datafile were fully searchable by host rather than pest and included a greater range of native plant hosts in addition to those within in the horticulture, agriculture and forestry sectors it would be of greater use to stakeholders within the natural environment sector. Currently the website allows only restricted and limited searching by host and the associated datafile needs considerable modification to allow searching by host.

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