

# Public banned from Forestry Commission land over wildfire fears

Baroness Young of Old Scone, chair of the commission, calls for firebreaks, lakes in woodlands and aerial support to combat blazes



A wildfire at Dunwich Heath ravaged National Trust and RSPB land

JOE GIDDENS/PA



**Adam Vaughan**, Environment Editor

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The Forestry Commission barred public access to some of its forests over fears that warning signs would not be enough to avoid the risk of people accidentally starting wildfires.

Baroness Young of Old Scone, chair of the commission, said its 1,500 woods in England had been hit by a “shedload” of fires this summer, many of them not publicly reported.

There have been closures on the organisation's land in the New Forest, Wykeham Forest in North Yorkshire, Colliers' Wood near Manchester and Shouldham in Norfolk due to blazes and the risk of more. "We stopped access because it was just too risky to have people and the risk of ignition," Young said.

Public access to the organisation's 250,000-plus acres of land is a key part of its mission, so access is only curbed reluctantly and rarely.



Baroness Young of Old Scone, chair of the commission, said many fires had gone unreported

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The [Dunwich Heath fire](#) on National Trust and RSPB land in Suffolk last month menaced neighbouring land, as did [the New Forest fire](#) started by a vehicle ablaze.

Young said the organisation might need to consider wider firebreaks next to roads through its land, as a proactive "prophylactic" rather than an emergency measure. Bulldozers have been used as an urgent intervention in some recent fires, to create vegetation-free firebreaks.

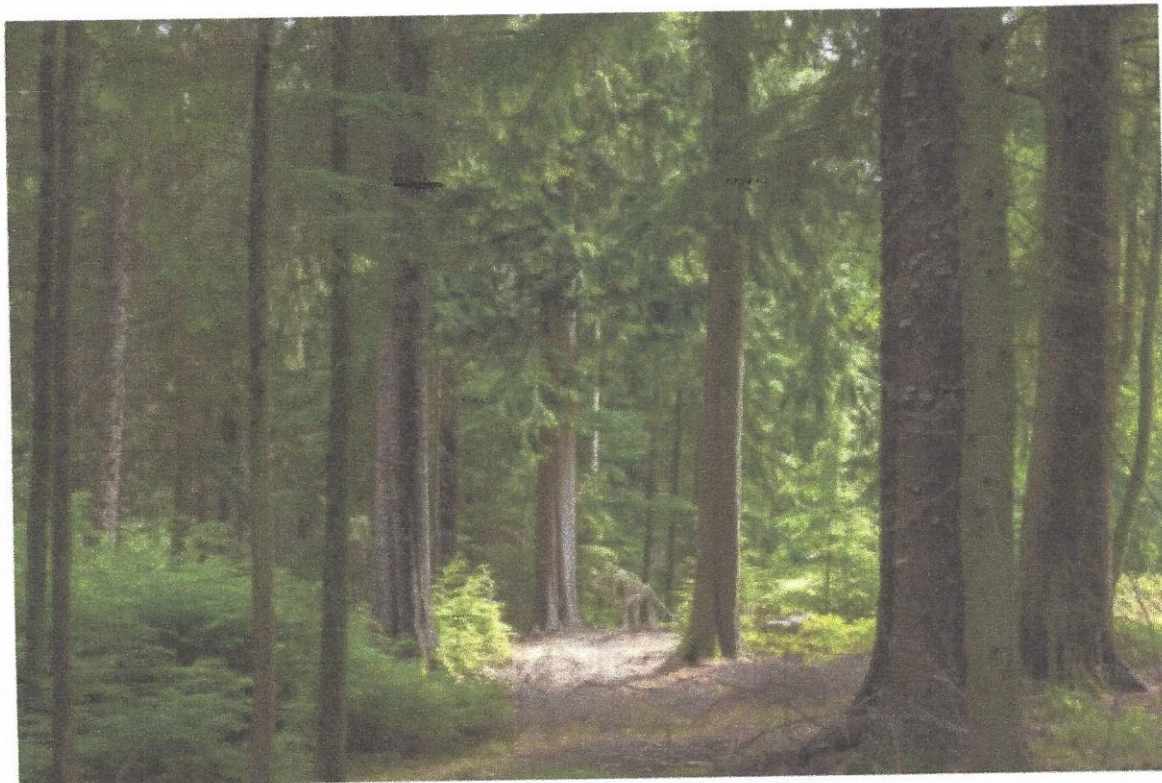
In her first interview with a national newspaper since becoming the commission chair, the Labour peer and long-time environmentalist said [this summer's record fires](#) showed the need for more reservoirs and lakes in woodlands.

"We used to hold a lot of woodland reservoirs. The problem is that they were all built in Victorian times and they're beginning to show their age," she said. Firefighters tackling the New Forest fire had to use an 8km-long hose to pump water from a lake.

The forestry chief said Britain also needed better access to aerial firefighting support as other European countries do, given the remote nature of many woodlands. "We absolutely have to do something about having access to helicopters," Young said.

Andy Burnham is [considering banning disposable barbecue sales](#) during summer months. Young said it was worth having a debate about whether they should ever be sold again. "They're a hazard," she said.

Young was speaking during a visit to Stourhead woodland in Wiltshire, where the peace was only pierced by the call of one of six locally breeding pairs of goshawks, a sizeable bird of prey.



The Stourhead estate, Wiltshire

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The biodiverse woods are a mixture of Douglas firs several hundred feet tall and other conifers that have been harvested for timber by the Hoare family for centuries. Unlike some drab Forestry Commission land dominated by rows of conifers, sometimes characterised as a monoculture of sitka, Stourhead has broadleaf trees mixed in too.



Forest manager David Pengelly, Barbara Young and estate owner Nick Hoare

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While large gaps are created on commission land when trees are felled for timber, the Wiltshire site uses “continuous cover forestry”, an approach that maintains a permanent forestry canopy. Foresters only harvest individual trees or small groups of them, creating small gaps in the canopy.

Young and colleagues see this as a model to emulate on large parts of their own estate. Trials are already away on public land in the south and southwest. Such forests are more resilient to a warming climate, and better for recreation as they’re more interesting to walk through.

Copying Stourhead’s success at scale will require the commission to persuade the public that much tougher controls are needed for deer and grey squirrels, Young said. “If they care about the red squirrels and they care about trees [they should back controls]. The public show signs that when you get the message to them, they do get it,” she said.

Grey squirrels strip bark off trees, rendering timber commercially worthless. Deer browse on young trees, preventing them from successfully establishing. Red squirrels could go extinct by 2050 without more culling of greys, [a nature regulator said earlier this year](#).



Tougher controls are required to curb grey squirrels which strip bark off trees

ALAMY

While Britain will never be self-sufficient for timber production, Young said the country could do better than importing 80 per cent of its timber, as it has for many years. She would like trees to be treated as critical national infrastructure on a par with roads, and called for a target for the use of timber frames in social housing.

The Forestry Commission admitted in its latest annual report that it was losing staff in England to better-paid roles in Scotland and Wales. Young said the staff losses were “not good”. In lieu of more money, she said she was working to make conditions and culture at the organisation more attractive.

Reflecting on this summer’s extreme weather, which the Met Office and scientists have linked to climate change, Young said she had often been left feeling like Private James Frazer in *Dad’s Army*, whose catchphrase was “We’re doomed!” Still, she said: “It’s like any challenge. You might not win. But giving up is not an option.”