



Synopsis of the Fifth International Fire Ecology and Management Congress

December 3-7, 2012

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In Portland, Oregon during the first week in December, the sun only shined for an hour sometime on Thursday afternoon, but the weather didn't matter inside the Oregon Convention Center where 700 people from around the country and the world came together to share their common interest in fire ecology and management.

Hosted by the Association for Fire Ecology (AFE), the Fifth International Fire Ecology and Management Congress took place December 3-7, 2012. With support from generous sponsors and a dedicated planning committee, AFE designed and executed a stimulating agenda to guide us through five days of information sharing and networking.

The theme for this year's Fire Congress – "Uniting Research, Education, and Management" – drew participants from multiple facets of the discipline. University professors and students presented alongside agency researchers and managers with everyone racing between meeting rooms to get to their favorite speakers or topics and the lively discussions that followed presentations. A total of 383 speakers were organized into 13 concurrent sessions each day that were moderated by a top professional in that particular field. Nearly half the presentations were organized into 28 special sessions that featured a specific prominent issue in fire ecology research, policy or management. A few examples included: "Issues of Wildfire Risk Assessment and Management," and "The Joint Fire Science Knowledge Exchange Consortia: Bridging the Chasm Between Management and Science." No matter what your particular interest, you were bound to find a presentation and discussion to attend. The biggest challenge for most individuals was to plot their schedule to capture their topics of interest as well as meet their curiosity for the most intriguing titles. There was so much going on that many people had tough choices about what to miss as well as what events to make.

Before diving into the three days packed with oral presentations, many chose to travel over the weekend in order to attend some of the full or half-day workshops that started the week of learning at the Fire Congress. With 12 different free workshops to choose from, there were many opportunities to learn a new skill or discipline in-person from an expert in the field demonstrating with hands-on applications. Also on Monday, several organizations took

advantage of the fact that so many key folks were together in the same place at the same time, so they hosted attached meetings. There were 14 formal meetings held—and many other informal meetings at round tables set up in the Convention Center’s spacious atrium—and for some people this was the first time they had actually met their colleagues in person since they usually “meet” by conference call. This reminded folks of the value of traveling to conferences that enable face-to-face meetings, informal discussions, and “hallway” networking.

Keynote speakers began each day in plenary sessions in the large ballroom. A total of 17 keynote speakers gave powerful talks such as Stephen Pyne’s talk, “Back to the Future: Analogues for the History to Come,” and Colleen Morton Busch and David Zimmerman who spoke about their book, “Fire Monks.” David and Colleen followed up with a morning meditation session for those early risers who made it to the Convention Center at 7am on Wednesday. On Thursday, Dr. Scott Stephens from the University of California at Berkeley had everyone buzzing with wonder after his talk, “Forest Fuel Reduction Treatments in the US: Is There any Evidence of Ecological Harm?” Friday morning’s plenary featured fire policy topics, and had an especially thought-provoking presentation about wildland fire use and ecosystem restoration by Tom Nichols of the National Park Service.

In addition to formal oral presentations, there were several opportunities to meet and mingle with fellow participants. The Monday evening “Welcome Reception” at one of the host hotels enabled old friends to enjoy a reunion over some fine food and drinks. The Tuesday evening reception in the spacious exhibit hall provided a great opportunity for folks to meet the 122 poster presenters and 22 exhibitors. The room was crowded with interested viewers, navigating the room to find the most remarkable posters that they picked out from the list. Some used the tactic of drifting through the aisles, browsing to see what catches their eye. The exhibitors were also quite an attraction: sponsors and supporters set up huge colorful displays with lots of information. Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology distributed free copies of the large coffee table book, “Wildfire A Century of Failed Forest Policy” to each participant of the Fire Congress. Throughout the week the Exhibit Hall was a central hub of folks wandering in and out to meet and talk.

The learning didn’t stop at the end of the day. For those who weren’t catching up with colleagues from the past or forming new connections, there were several evening activities to attend: a book signing (Fire Monks: Zen Mind Meets Wildfire), a film screening (Prescribed Fire in Northern California: Perceptions and Applications by Will Harling), and slide show (The Art of Fire by Sarah Trainor), numerous small informal meetings, and the great nightlife in Portland. Finally, the AFE Awards Banquet let people enjoy a fine meal with friends, and collectively honor one of the co-founders of AFE, Dr. Jan van Wagendonk, who received the Biswell Lifetime Achievement Award during the banquet.

Overall, AFE was pleased with the turn-out at this event. In today’s economic situation, they recognize how hard it can be for people to gain approval and/or funding to travel to conferences.

Organizers, sponsors, and participants showed an impressive dedication and commitment to the field of fire ecology by getting to the Fire Congress. Credit goes to everyone involved for making this the premier wildland fire conference—not just the largest and the most comprehensive, but also the most treasured and inspiring event of its kind. As our world becomes more reliant on webinars and video conferences, virtual work environments and social media, these professional gatherings are becoming even more relevant to nurture our human connections and truly share in learning. Be on the look-out for the Sixth International Fire Congress to be hosted by AFE San Antonio, Texas in 2016.