



SPREADING LIKE WILDFIRE

The implications of climate change, wildfire forecasting systems and the development of the EuroFire pilot project were just some of the topics discussed by UK and international experts at the Wildfire 2007 conference in North Yorkshire in June. JJ Worrall looks at the highlights of the two-day event.



On 5 and 6 June this year, over 135 delegates, speakers and exhibitors met up in North Yorkshire for Wildfire 2007. Billed as 'the UK's largest ever wildfire event', delegates from a wide range of organisations, such as fire and rescue services, national park authorities,

government agencies and trade bodies, were all in attendance at the bi-annual event.

The breadth of topics discussed at the two-day event is quite something, with lecture titles such as 'Making Water Wetter' and '60 years of Smokey Bear' among some of the more colourful presentations.

Introducing the event on the first morning was Mark Jones, deputy chief fire officer from the Essex County Fire and Rescue Service. Jones is also chairman of the Forest Fires Commission for the International Association of Fire and Rescue Services (CTIF), which is over a century in existence.

Addressing the delegates, Jones urged co-operation as a way forward to understanding and tackling the dangers of wildfire. "I urge you all to take the professional opportunity to network and exchange views and contact details. One of the reasons the subject of wildfire is disparate in policy terms is that very few people actually know who is doing what and some very good examples of practice are not well known."

He continued, "Wildfire has not traditionally been considered a UK Fire Service problem. Whilst many occurred, in some years, in certain areas, they were regarded with some bemusement – something of a distraction from more urban issues. Fire, in our terms, has always been



Mark Jones, Deputy CFO, Essex County Fire and Rescue Service, on a live link to the conference, urged co-operation as a way forward to tackling the dangers of wildfire.

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In Jones' opinion, this is now changing and more officers are recognising that many fires cannot effectively be tackled by a direct attack and immediate suppression. As environmental understanding develops and public expectations are more managed, Jones feels they may even reach a position in which it is understood that certain fires can be "left to burn".

GORSE FIRES

In Ireland, wildfires may not seem like a major problem but the issue of gorse fires which took place in Longford, Roscommon, Armagh and Wicklow featured in issue 8 of *Fire Brigade Journal*. Lessons from this UK conference could certainly be learned by brigades in this part of the world.

While both Ireland and the UK have had rain-drenched summers, the dangers are still there once the sun returns for long enough – Jones noted that in the UK, the regularity

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and scale of wildfires has started to change.

Continuing on the subject, the Essex deputy CFO said: "From a fire service perspective, there are longer burning seasons and larger, more resource-intensive fires which place demands on our service

arrangements that can be considerable. The process of allocating resources is driven by integrated risk management planning and wildfire has traditionally factored in those assessments." A Wildfire 2007 spokesperson noted also that the demands placed upon services by a spate of grass and bushfires can severely restrict the levels of operational cover remaining to provide what could be deemed 'life protective' services.

The website www.wildfire2007.org.uk – where Wildfire 2009 is already being advertised – notes there are "other factors" that must be considered. It names crop fires as presenting a considerable safety hazard for firefighters, and also a cause of huge losses to the farming community.

Continued Jones; "As drought conditions become more commonplace, it also seems that UK fire and rescue services must start to emulate those areas of the world in which firefighting is not based solely upon the application of copious amounts of water."



In Ireland gorse fires remain a big problem; a number of gorse and bog fires took place in counties Longford, Roscommon, Armagh and Wicklow in 2006.

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EUROFIRE PROJECT

Among the first few topics discussed were the EuroFire pilot project and the possibility of developing a new wildfire training resource for Europe. EuroFire is a partnership developed to support firefighters as well the rural sector with education and training. It has its origins from the Wildfire 2005 event where a partnership grew between the Global Fire Monitoring Centre (GFMC), rural development initiatives (RDI) and forest fire commission element of the CTIF.

GFMC is a sub-division of the Max Planck Institute for Chemistry and an associate institute of the United Nations University (UNU), based in Freiburg, Germany. The centre is responsible for the research, preparation and drafting of the training materials and the production of a new online training resource for EuroFire. RDI on the other hand is the UK partner – a non-profit management and rural sector consultancy company – that is the EuroFire project promoter and co-ordinator with responsibility for the project's management and reporting functions.

Fully established since 2006, EuroFire was represented at Wildfire 2007 by Claire

Glaister, project promoter at RDI and Michael Bruce who is project manager for GFMC. Among their core messages was the idea of developing relevant and innovative e-learning content for those interested in their ideas, as well as "to promote social dialogue in vocational training".

Said Glaister, "EuroFire brings together partners with international expertise and experience to research and review competency-based wildfire training systems. We also identify best practice from Europe and around the world, as well as informing the production of competency-based basic training.

"EuroFire provides a basic level modular-based training resource that those in the industry can use to update their knowledge, learn new skills or increase their understanding of wildfire management techniques."

Bruce and Glaister asked delegates interested in EuroFire to provide them with "country-specific examples" for their research, as well as helping them evaluate the proposed training material. Delegates were also requested to assist in spreading the word about the project.

NATURAL BEAUTY

The threat of wildfire in areas of natural beauty also came under the spotlight during the conference. Tim Russell, Andy Harris and Andrew Davis – all rangers at the picturesque Quantock Hills in Somerset – each contributed to a presentation entitled 'Working with Fire – Safety First'. Discussing how to test out methods of dealing with such incidents, they talked about the use of 'burns' in certain areas of land for training.

"Fire is an ancient tool that demands respect," said Russell. He recommended thorough risk assessment and checking of burn site; assessment and recording of environmental and weather conditions; 'run through' of the agreed burn and health and safety to team. He also suggested that landowners and fire service be informed when carrying out a 'burn'.

From there they discussed a step-by-step guide of how to safely carry out a test; measure its successes and failures; use the experience for future training as well as how best to share knowledge with other fire authorities. They listed climate change as a "real issue" to consider in the preservation of wildfire in areas of natural beauty such as the Quantock Hills.

FORECASTING SYSTEMS

Climate change was a major issue for many presentations at Wildfire 2007 where its impact on both a UK and global scale was discussed. Elsewhere, forecasting systems to battle against wildfire were the subject of a talk by Dr Matt Davies, who is head of FireBeaters – an agency that provides information for all those concerned with vegetation fires, both wild and prescribed in the UK. Davies also works at the Centre for the Study of Environmental Change and Sustainability in the University of Edinburgh.

Other subjects over the two-day event included increasing water supplies for moorland firefighting, the performance of wildfire suppression systems, and fire management in South West Australia.

Addressing the delegates, Mark Jones, Essex County's deputy chief fire officer,



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expressed his desire "to establish an English wildfire forum", which is something already in place in Scotland. In a message that could go well beyond the borders of his

own country, he also noted that "some fire authorities do not consider wildfire to be a priority" and pleaded for extra attention to be paid to the area worldwide.