

UK Wildfire Conference 2024

Katrina Candy opening address

12th November



Good Morning Everyone and a very warm welcome to the UK Wildfire Conference which this year has adopted the theme of Resilience in a Changing World.

My name is Katrina Candy and I am Director of The Heather Trust, organisers of Wildfire 2024. We are a national charity that advocates for sustainable, resilient moorlands which includes preparedness for the increasing threat of wildfire here in the UK.

We are kicking off proceedings today with a video presentation from Jim Fairlie MSP, Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity, who has extensive personal and political experience in rural affairs.

Thank you Minister.

It's good to be back in Aberdeen – I studied Communication here many years ago, and so it is serendipitous that I am back here now to welcome you to an event which is all about building communication channels and sharing knowledge.

I would firstly like to introduce Michael Humphreys, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and Michael Bruce of Glen Tanar Estate and Firebreak services, Chair and Vice Chair respectively of the Scottish Wildfire Forum who are hosting this event. They will be making regular appearances throughout the conference so Michael and Michael, please make yourselves known!

It gives me great pleasure to be able to say that here at Wildfire 2024, we have delegates and speakers from all parts of the UK and from across the globe, here to engage with the topic of 'Resilience in a Changing World'.

It's incredible to see so many of you here for this hot ticket event. Incredible because it illustrates just how important the issue of wildfire is internationally and here in the UK

but also because within this room, we have some of the leading lights and brightest minds in wildfire research, mitigation and management.

20 years ago there was a wildfire seminar held in Aberdeen. That event led to the establishment of the Scottish Wildfire Forum, then the England and Wales Wildfire Forum and then the growth of interest in Northern Ireland and Wales which cumulatively has all led to a much better policy and organisational framework. This development of Fora, who share work and collaborate within the UK constitutional framework, coupled with the focus of effort every two years on the UK Wildfire Conference in a different part of the UK, is a powerful combination supporting change to make us all more resilient. These are all real successes in a challenging environment that we hope to build on at this conference.

This event has been no small feat to organise and we have had an amazing team driving it forward to be in a position to now offer you a line-up of speakers and activities that will provide you with knowledge, insight, inspiration and connectivity. Over the next two days, you will have the opportunity to hear from, and network with, those at the sharp end of wildfire resilience.

We are covering every aspect of wildfire at this event. From crofting to satellite sensors, peat fires to public safety, tourism to Vikings – and I am 100% confident we will have something of interest for everyone in this room.

It may have been a slightly soggy spring and summer for us here in Scotland and the thought of wildfires far from our minds but many of those joining us here in Aberdeen from further afield have been in the very midst of dealing with severe fires this year and they are very fresh in their minds. We can certainly learn from their experiences and benefit from their first-hand knowledge of dealing with wildfire at scale.

We talk a lot about climate change, tipping points and global resilience and when we see the sheer visceral devastation wildfire can have on our landscapes, communities and individuals, it is hard to deny there is a shift in nature, whether caused by land use change, climatic conditions or human interaction with our wild areas – but it is a change that has or will probably impact us all.

We need only look to the devastation caused recently in Valencia, Spain with unbelievable images of flooding and tragic loss of life. And we have actually had to make a change to today's programme due to one of our speakers being unable to attend because of the tragic situation in Spain.

Flooding and wildfire may seem worlds apart but we know that climate change is intensifying the severity and frequency of both these phenomena.

Therefore we must modify behaviours, anticipate our future needs and intervene as best we can to mitigate wildfire, and other, risks. To enable this we must break down geographical and political boundaries and pool our knowledge on a regional and global level. We must be flexible, willing to learn, happy to share and ready to act.

The power of fire is in its ease to start and its ability to spread quickly and there is an enormous amount of work here in the UK that must be put in place to protect existing and new natural capital assets and carbon stores such as woodlands and rewilded vegetation. Mitigating wildfire risk begins with acceptance and sound planning to build proper resilience.

So, in thinking about the topic for this conference we looked at the meaning of Resilience:

“The capacity of an individual, community or system to adapt in order to sustain an acceptable level of function, structure and identity” Says one source.

“The ability of a social or ecological system to absorb disturbances while retaining the same basic structure and ways of functioning, the capacity for self-organisation, and the capacity to adapt to stress and change” Says another.

Both definitions focus on adapting and absorbing rather than prevention and response, but when we look at a Scottish Government definition, it says: “Communities and individuals harnessing resources and expertise to help themselves prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies, in a way that complements the work of the emergency responders.”

To us, the word **prepare** was key.

If you take anything away from this event (and I hope you will take a lot), take with you a sense of urgency and endeavour to prepare and help build global resilience to wildfire through integrated fire management. We are all here because we recognise the importance of building resilience to wildfires. By engaging stakeholders and fostering a shared understanding of the risks, we can educate and reduce this risk. And it doesn't have to be complicated to make an impact.

Just think – one degree Centigrade increase in temperature, plus one discarded match, that costs less than one penny, can destroy a region. It is worrying that we are on a trajectory to a 3 degree increase in global temperatures - and what exactly will that look like in terms of disaster, disaster mitigation and response.

No doubt these themes are also being discussed at another global event today - COP29 in Baku.

I will not go into detail of how we, as a community, can reduce wildfire risk – I'll leave that to the many experts in this venue - but suffice to say that we are all here because we believe we can play a part whether through landscape management, reducing our carbon footprint, educating our communities, engaging with politicians, providing training, scientific research or product development, by continuing to share knowledge and prepare, we can all make a difference.

Before I finish I would like to remind everyone to visit our exhibitors and view the poster submissions as this event also provides a platform for new entrants to this sector. To recognise new research and work of students within the field of wildfire, we will, this evening, be presenting the inaugural Heather Trust Charles Gimingham Award for contributing to wildfire science. This award has been established to recognise the most promising new entrant developing research contributing to wildfire science and is named after Professor Charles Gimingham OBE, who was Regius Professor of Botany at the University of Aberdeen and a pioneer of research in heathland ecology and fire management. He was also a past Chairman of The Heather Trust and we are delighted

to be joined later, at dinner, by his two daughters to present the award alongside Professor Rob Marrs.

Over the next 2 days, the conference sessions in both rooms will be chaired by experts in the field of wildfire. Including:

Michael Humphreys from the Scottish fire and rescue service. Michael is the Local Senior Officer and Area Commander for Highland and currently Wildfire capability lead for SFRS and Chair of the Scottish wildfire forum. Living and working with the Highland area he has experienced the devastation from wildfire and the resilience from all agencies and the local communities.

Carmen Sanchez-Garcia is a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Wildfire Research at Swansea University where she also gained her PhD in 2021. Originally from Spain, she is interested in the effects of wildfires on the environment. Her current research focuses on understanding and assessing the effects of fire on soils and water quality using a combination of laboratory, fieldwork, and modelling approaches.

Ciaran Nugent is a Regional Forestry Inspector from Ireland. He leads on forest engineering, technology and infrastructure development within the Forest Service, Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine. He has been involved with fire management development in Ireland since 2010 and has completed Fire Management Training in Spain, and the United States. He is a member of the EU Forest Fires Group, Pau Costa Foundation, and a current serving Board Member of the International Association of Wildland Fire. He is an active Civil Defence auxiliary firefighter and Swiftwater responder.

Becky Davies is a Senior Officer in the South Wales Regional Environmental Planning team in Natural Resources Wales. Becky has over 20 years experience in ecology, working in both practical and strategic delivery of biodiversity, conservation and landscape-scale restoration and protection. Becky has a keen interest in Wildfire, particularly demonstrating integrated management of the landscape to reduce risk and impact of wildfires, which are a persistent challenge in South Wales.

Liam Wilson joined Lancashire Fire & Rescue Service in 1997. He has a personal interest in wildfires, having served for a number of years at several stations in East Lancashire, the area of Lancashire which holds the greatest wildfire risk. He has chaired the Lancashire Fire Operations Group for the last 8 years and been an NFCC Wildfire Tactical Advisor for the last 7 years. During this time, he has attended wildfires ranging from moorland and nature reserves through to forestry plantations.

I'd like everyone to use #Wildfire2024 when sharing posts about this conference on socials and please scan the QR code that is on the screens and elsewhere to complete our short feedback form.

I would now like to hand over to our first session chair Michael Humphreys, chair of the Scottish Wildfire Forum and Area Commander in Highland with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

Thank you.