

# **“Words on Fire: Toward a New Language of Wildland Fire”**

## **November 1-2, 2012, Oregon State University**

### **Compiled by Nathaniel Brodie, Spring Creek Project**

#### **Executive Summary**

The premise of “Words on Fire” was that the words we use to describe our terms of engagement with fire shape the stories we tell about it. And the stories we tell shape the way we act. Unfortunately, as Stephen Pyne remarked in the symposium, our “words have failed our drip-torches and pulaskis” and our narratives are limited and out-dated.

“Words on Fire” considered the constraints and possibilities of wildland fire language and narrative by convening an unorthodox blend of scientists, managers, and humanists. Presenters included one of the world’s foremost fire scholars; a USFS District Ranger with fourteen years experience managing a fire-prone district; a microbiologist and dancer; a scientist and fire modeler; an former firefighter and self-proclaimed “pyrogandist”; and a Zen-practitioner and author.

The presentations and conversation ranged from cultural narratives and media tropes, language and perception, communication and change, poetry and public lands, metaphor and creative vision, all under the rubric of wildfire, all with the goal of helping us forge ever more thoughtful, realistic, flexible, and creative relationships with wildland fire. Though the conversation covered a lot of ground, it also honed in on certain themes:

- We have a limited set of cultural wildfire narratives—fire-as-battlefield being the predominate narrative. Our language, our media portrayal, and public understanding of wildfire reflect this limited set. Further collaborations with and insights from the humanities may help create new narratives and language.
- New narratives and revitalized language won’t arise unless we re-install fire as part of our daily lives. New and diverse language—especially verb-heavy vernacular— will arise from grass-roots, community-based relationships with fire. In the end, citizens need to decide what they want their public lands to be and how they should be managed. Once we decide on what we want our land to be, we can decide fire’s role on the land and how we speak about it.
- Changing our dominant wildfire narratives will involve finding an appropriate story-line and positioning new stories in terms of known stories. But more so we need to expand and embrace linguistic and narrative diversity: it’s not a matter of transplanting one narrative or language-set for another (replacing negative terms with neutral scientific language or value-laden positive language), it’s a matter of expansion and the use of many languages. As Pyne put it, future “language should be as free-ranging as free-ranging fire.”
- That said, a top-down approach can be effective: a change in USFS management would filter down to firefighters, then to the media, and then the public. A number of value-laden words, terms, and concepts could easily be changed: “Fire-resistant communities” could be “fire-compatible communities;” “Community Wildfire Protection Plans” could be “Community Fire Preparation;” “fire safe landscapes” could be “fire permeable landscapes;” etc.

Words on Fire was held Nov. 1-2, 2012, at Oregon State University and organized by the Spring Creek Project, in collaboration with Joint Fire Science Program (JFSP); the Northwest Fire

Science Consortium; U.S. Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station; and Oregon State University's College of Forestry. Videos of all presentations are available at <http://wildfirehumanities.wordpress.com/existing-and-potential-wildfire-humanities-programs/conferences-workshops-and-symposia/words-on-fire-towards-a-new-language-of-wildland-fire/>.

## **Introduction**

Wildfire intensity, duration, and frequency are increasing across the Western United States but cultural and media portrayals of fire remain mired in apocalyptic terminology and narratives, while the vocabulary of fire policy, management, and science is value-laden, jargon-strewn, and opaque. With this in mind, the Spring Creek Project, in collaboration with Joint Fire Science program (JFSP), the NorthWest Fire Science Consortium, the U.S. Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station, and Oregon State University's College of Forestry, convened a diverse group of professionals with ties to wildland fire in a symposium titled "Words on Fire: Toward a New Language of Wildland Fire."

The premise of "Words on Fire" was that the words we use to describe our terms of engagement with fire shape the stories we tell about it. And the stories we tell shape the way we act. "Words on Fire" thus considered the range of language we currently use to grapple with wildland fire, and looked toward new metaphors and revitalized language that might help us forge ever more thoughtful, realistic, flexible, and creative relationships with wildland fire. It did this not solely through fire-science and resource-management, but by exploring the contributions that insights from the humanities have made to the ways we think about and act in relation to wildland fire.

## **Schedule**

Thursday, November 1, 7 pm, Gilfillan Auditorium, OSU

Keynote Address: Dr. Stephen J. Pyne

Friday, November 2, 9 am – 3:30 pm, Richardson Hall 107, OSU

9:00 Dr. Thomas Maness, Dean, College of Forestry: welcome

Charles Goodrich, Director, Spring Creek Project: symposium overview

9:15 Bill Anthony, USFS (retired): 20 years of changing terms of engagement with wildland fire in a complex social / natural environment

10:00 Dr. Tim Ingalsbee and Dr. Karin Riley: changing terms of engagement from a fire fighter's perspective, and mass media narratives of wildland fire

10:40 Break

11:00 Dr. Mary Beth Leigh and Dr. Sarah Trainor: Alaska fire science and arts in performance

11:45 Colleen Morton Busch (author, Fire Monks): fire as 'teacher' and the 2008 Tassajara Zen Center fire

12:30 Lunch (Market Place West – East of Richardson and Peavy Halls)

2:00 Panel discussion facilitated by Dr. Kathleen Dean Moore, with Bill Anthony, Colleen Morton Busch, Dr. Tim Ingalsbee, Dr. Mary Beth Leigh, Dr. Stephen Pyne, Dr. Karin Riley, and Dr. Sarah Trainor

## **Synopsis of Events**

### **Keynote Address: Dr. Stephen J. Pyne**

*Stephen Pyne is one of the world's foremost experts on the history and management of fire. Pyne spent fifteen seasons as a wildland firefighter at the North Rim of Grand Canyon National Park between 1967 and 1981. Since the publication of his second book, *Fire in America* in 1982, he has written at least a dozen other books on wildfire, including *Tending Fire: Coping With America's Wildfires* (Island Press, 2004) and *Fire: A Brief History* (University of Washington Press and British Museum, 2001). He is a professor in the School of Life Sciences at Arizona State University.*

(Text of Dr. Pyne's full speech can be found here: [firehistory.asu.edu/words-on-fire-from-a-scholar-on-fire/](http://firehistory.asu.edu/words-on-fire-from-a-scholar-on-fire/). A video of the keynote can be found here: [http://media.oregonstate.edu/index.php/show/?id=0\\_uo5e6hbq](http://media.oregonstate.edu/index.php/show/?id=0_uo5e6hbq))

Stephen Pyne started his keynote speech, titled “Words on Fire from a Scholar on Fire,” with the line: “words matter.” He then demonstrated how the words we use to describe wildland fire are out of sync with our societal needs regarding wildfire. “Words have failed our drip-torches and pulaskis,” Pyne said. This is evident not so much in a lack of words, but the use of words and prose that lead to poor, vague, or incompetent communication. Pyne cited George Orwell's famous essay [“Politics and the English Language”](#):

“Orwell identified practices (or “tricks,” as he termed them) by which “the work of prose-construction is habitually dodged,” among them dying metaphors, verbal false limbs, and pretentious diction segueing into an inflated style. Think of the use of “fire event” in place of “fire.” Think of “fire surrogates” as a euphemism for logging, or “mechanical treatments” abstracting away from chipping and cutting. Read any proposal submitted to a funding agency and you will likely find a string of current hot-button phrases, or as Orwell put it, “gum[med] together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else.” Instead of “picking out words for the sake of their meaning and inventing images in order to make the meaning clearer,” we have the reverse. It's not that our words can't say what we want, but that we seem afraid to use them to say clearly what we really do want.”

The problem, Pyne explained, is that we don't know what we really do want, and our language—words and metaphors—reflect that. Pyne pointed out how strange it is—given it's protean nature—that fire is constantly a source of metaphor (“spread like wildfire”) yet never a receptacle of metaphor. Part of this may owe to the failure to situate wildfire in other cultural arenas. But generally we have a limited set of metaphors—fire-as-battlefield—because they reflect a limited set of cultural wildfire narrative. Pyne attributed

this to fire being a phenomenon built on conflict, and thus naturally leading to battlefield-like narratives, whereas wildfire restoration or “ecological benefits” narratives act to reduce tension, and don’t provide the same gripping story. Prescribed fire, Pyne noted, makes “good practice but crummy narrative.”

He noted that languages live and shift and improve and words frequently decay, or pejorate. This seems to be especially true regarding wildfire words; Pyne detailed the shifting use of terms such as “let burn,” “prescribed natural fire,” “wildland fire use,” and “environmental burn.” Since these terms mean nothing, the burden falls on land managers to interpret. Abstract and bureaucratic language, he noted, can obscure meaning and will through its opaqueness. Acronyms are a prime example: WUI for wildland-urban-interface. “WUI is a dumb name, but it’s a dumb problem,” Pyne said bluntly. Another name might help—he proposed exurban fire and intermix fire—but in the end, citizens need to determine what they want out of their public lands. “Until the public decides what it wants its public lands to be and how it chooses to manage them, the uncertainties (in language) will endure.”

Pyne pointed out that much of what we know of public lands and wildfire has been conveyed by one iconic figure: Smokey Bear. According to Pyne, Smokey Bear owes his success to his target audience: young, postwar, suburban children in a world devoid of all flame but the virtual, devastating one’s on TV. ([Bambi fire scene.](#)) Smokey Bear’s message made great sense for built landscapes, but has outlived its usefulness in public wildlands.

However, if we are looking to convey an alternative message, we shouldn’t yearn for an anti-Smokey the Bear, a “Flamey the Bear” with a driptorch instead of a shovel. Wildfire is too big for one slogan now. “Language should be as free-ranging as free-ranging fire,” Pyne said. We need to promote “all fires” just as we do “all hazards” or “all lands.” We need to look back at indigenous cultures relationships with fire, relationships that were wiped out by a European “no-fire-in-Eden” paradigm. We need to question this paradigm, just as we have questioned the USFS’s former “hegemony” of fire: we need alternate power structures. And, as far as language, we need fire-words derived from verbs that speak to acts. As an example, Pyne praised the “gerund-rich loam” of firefighter’s “sub-literate vernacular” that has given us terms such as “cold trailing” “burnouts” and “smoke chasing.” Pyne ended by saying:

“If they are rooted in realities, in acts on the ground, the right words will gush forth as they did for earlier generations. They will speak to acts; they will come from verbs. If not they will seep away or pejorate. Words can give expression to what is or is coming to be. They can’t substitute for them. If we want to set words on fire, we must first set the world on fire.”

### **Bill Anthony, USFS (retired)**

*Bill Anthony retired as District Ranger of the Sisters Ranger District in 2011 after three decades in the U.S. Forest Service. Anthony’s first job as District Ranger was helping to write the Deschutes National Forest’s first Forest Plan, a long-range policy and planning document required under the then-new National Environmental Policy Act. In his fourteen years as District Ranger, Anthony built bridges between the Forest Service and environmental groups that resulted in collaborative restoration projects such as the Metolius demonstration project, a large-scale restoration effort that thinned out crowded and unhealthy areas around the Metolius River.*

(A video of Bill Anthony's talk can be found at [http://media.oregonstate.edu/index.php/show/?id=0\\_fp9piq2x](http://media.oregonstate.edu/index.php/show/?id=0_fp9piq2x))

Bill Anthony started the morning by saying "I'm still wondering where a former district ranger fits in the realm of the humanities," and then demonstrated exactly where: as a grounding force. A District Ranger—especially in a fire-prone area such as Sisters, Oregon—is where the rubber meets the road in any discussion of wildfire, and thus Anthony provided both that invaluable perspective and a "ground truthing" presence for the symposium's ideas.

Anthony put the Symposium's task into context. He provided a brief overview of the last century of forestry paradigms and fire-fighting policies, and how we're now facing the consequences of this past. He produced a fascinating map of a century's worth of fire in the Metolius drainage: close to 2/3 of the district had burned. Echoing Pyne's remarks about the previous USFS "hegemony" over fire, Anthony spoke to how decision-making processes regarding active wildfires have become more transparent, analyzed, documented, reviewed, and more inclusive than ever before.

But where he really hit stride was in his articulation of the new firefighter as media-manager: fighting fire hasn't changed all that much, but dealing with the public has. Since 30% of U.S. population (and 9.4% of homes) lives in WUI, communication with these communities has emerged as a paramount concern in a District Ranger's profession. As Anthony put it, a uniformed or misinformed public becomes a whole other "incident." Providing information, he said, is like pouring water on a fire. And while the USFS remains mired in acronyms—"we can have an entire conversation just in acronyms," Anthony admitted—communicating and building relationships and trust with local communities (which includes information and awareness between actual wildfires) is critical. This, Anthony said, is the future of wildland fire: as an inclusive process of stakeholder relationships founded on communication and trust.

According to Anthony, the public as a whole has become more accepting of wildfire—they still dislike fire, but have come to a grim acceptance of the reality of wildland fire. Communities are starting to react to fires as they do to bad winter storms: by viewing them as inconvenient and disruptive and as a threat to economy, but not necessarily a shock to the worldview. Much of this can be attributed to generational evolution—Anthony pointed out that during his father's time, fire suppression was in full effect; his son, meanwhile, has grown up witnessing the effects of those suppression decades.

### **Dr. Tim Ingalsbee**

*Timothy Ingalsbee is the Executive Director of Firefighters United for Safety Ethics and Ecology (FUSEE). He is also the director of the Western Fire Ecology Center (WFEC) for the American Lands Alliance, which does research, analysis, education, and advocacy on fire-related federal forest management issues. Ingalsbee earned a Ph.D. in environmental sociology from the University of Oregon in 1995 and has worked as an Adjunct Assistant Professor at Humboldt State University in Arcata, California; Willamette University in Salem, Oregon; and the University of Oregon in Eugene. Ingalsbee was a wildland firefighter for the U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service during the 1980s.*

(A video of Tim Ingalsbee's talk can be found at [http://media.oregonstate.edu/index.php/show/?id=0\\_8guc8env](http://media.oregonstate.edu/index.php/show/?id=0_8guc8env))

Ingalsbee introduced the Whorfian hypothesis—that language shapes individual and societal perception of world. Since linguistic patterns vary widely, the modes of thinking and perceiving in groups utilizing different linguistic systems will result in basically different world views. While this is still up-for-debate among linguists, it's a safe bet to say that language influences thought.

With this in mind, Ingalsbee's organization—[Firefighters United for Safety Ethics and Ecology](#) (FUSEE)—employs “pyroganda” (for example, calling fire retardant “chemical warfare”) to both shed light on our culture's over-reliance on the fire-as-battlefield narrative, but to ask the question: are we undertaking a war on flame or a war on our forests? What are the ecological casualties of our firefighting tactics? To Ingalsbee, “ecology is the bottom line,” and we need our language to reflect that. If words undermine or obfuscate understanding, we need to change them or redefine them.

Ingalsbee posed the question “How are we going to change our fire-management mission and paradigm unless we really exercise our language?” He then listed a number of words, terms, and concepts he is interested in changing or re-articulating: change “ecological disturbance” into “ecological stimulus.” “Fire-resistant communities” should be “fire-compatible communities.” Instead of “Community Wildfire Protection Plans” we should have “Community Fire Preparation.” Instead of “fire safe landscapes” we should say “fire permeable landscapes.”

This all led him up to his big peeve: the term “fire-fighter,” which, in Ingalsbee's mind, should be made as anachronistic as “smoke-eater.” He listed a number of other options—“fire ranger,” “fire-lighter,” “fire-cowboy”—and dismissed each in turn, most hilariously “Fire-tender,” which he dismissed, saying that adrenaline junky firefighters won't like to be compared to Little Bo Peep.

Ingalsbee believes if we can engage society in preparing for fire, they will better support using fire as a restoration tool. Media can help engage society, and in an effort to get reporters to go beyond mere “war reporting” on firefighting actions, FUSEE released a “Reporter's Guide to Wildland Fire,” which urges reporters to replace common “loaded” terms (“catastrophic,” “out-of-control” “fighting fire”) with neutral or new terms (“high severity,” “unconfined,” “managing fire,” respectively)

But Ingalsbee agreed with Pyne that words won't change, or the terminology even matter, unless we re-install fire as part of our daily lives. “Why should we have to go into the middle of the desert for Burning Man to have a big fire when every little rural community could have a burn as part of living with fire?” According to Ingalsbee, we need to overcome pyrophobia by nurturing our innate pyrophilia.

### **Dr. Karin Riley**

*Karin Riley became fascinated with wildfire when the Big Bar Fire began burned toward her family's land in northern California in 1999. She noticed that mass media's negative narrative about fire didn't describe what she saw on the land. She recently completed a PhD in Geosciences at University of Montana, where her studies focused on wildfire. Karin works for Systems for Environmental Management, and is stationed at the Missoula Fire Sciences Lab.*

(A video of Karin Riley's talk can be found at [http://media.oregonstate.edu/index.php/show/?id=0\\_t9msdwp0](http://media.oregonstate.edu/index.php/show/?id=0_t9msdwp0))

Riley, who earned her Master's degree with an investigation into media narratives of fire in 2000, picked up the discussion where Ingalsbee had left off. She presented slides of headlines from the 2012 fire season—"Monster Fire Terrorizes a Colorado City" (CNN)—to frame her discussion on cultural narratives of wildfire.

Riley presented a graph of words used by media in the 2000 fire season—the majority of them focusing on the "destructive" aspect of wildfire: "destroyed," "threatening," "charred," "scorched," "blackened," "raged," "devastated," "uncontrollable," "catastrophic," "consumed." Whereas she found 94 instances of words with negative connotations, she only found 3 uses of words with positive connotations: "beautiful" (twice) and "awesome" (once). These words piece together to form the dominant cultural narrative of fire as "destructive," "monstrous," etc. Yet there still exists a parallel narrative of "fire-use," which was originally applied to Native Americans and settlers.

According to Riley, a narrative is a story commonly told; it often becomes a force by itself. Narratives give us a sense of stability, they reinforce the status quo. She quoted Emery Roe, who applies narrative analysis to public policy narratives, "Stories...often resist change or modification even in the presence of contradicting empirical data, because they continue to underwrite and stabilize the assumptions for decision making in the face of high uncertainty, complexity, and polarization." (Roe 1994)

Riley also posed the question: "How to change dominant narratives?" and quoted Hajer (1995): "finding the appropriate story-line becomes an important form of agency." Riley noted that it is difficult to change prevalent notions, and if new stories are to successfully arise and replace the dominant storyline, they must be positioned in terms of known stories, or risk losing credibility. Both "fire-use" and "destructive fire" narratives will remain, and future narratives would be wise to build upon and slowly "tweak" or "build from" these two narratives. We can, however, learn from narrative and content analysis that a new message must be suited to transmission by mass media, have good sound-bites, and have a well-chosen storyline.

### **Dr. Mary Beth Leigh and Dr. Sarah Trainor**

*Mary Beth Leigh is the coordinator of arts and humanities integrative activities at Bonanza Creek LTER. She's an Associate Professor in microbiology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and also a modern dancer/choreographer with the company Deliquescent Designs. She has assisted in organizing field workshops for artists and scientists that have culminated in two performing arts events and a visual arts exhibit on the theme of climate change in Alaska, under the title In a Time of Change. She's also taught an integrative course in Climate Change and Creative Expression at a predominantly Alaska Native charter high school in Fairbanks that culminated in an original student performance combining dance, theater, poetry and climate change science.*

*Sarah Trainor is a Research Assistant Professor at University of Alaska Fairbanks. Trainor conducts research related to human-dimensions of climate change in Alaska, specializing in communicating scientific information about climate change and its impacts to diverse*

*stakeholder audiences. She holds an M.A. (1996) and Ph.D. (2002) in Energy and Resources from the University of California, Berkeley and a B.A. in Philosophy and Environmental Studies from Mount Holyoke College (1992). She is serving as project PI for the JFSP-funded grant "In a Time of Change: The Art of Fire," a multidisciplinary collaborative project that has brought together artists, firefighters, and forestry managers in Alaska.*

(Videos of Mary Beth Leigh's and Sarah Trainor's talks can be found at:  
[http://media.oregonstate.edu/index.php/show/?id=0\\_glm8y1cg](http://media.oregonstate.edu/index.php/show/?id=0_glm8y1cg) and  
[http://media.oregonstate.edu/index.php/show/?id=0\\_r30dovna](http://media.oregonstate.edu/index.php/show/?id=0_r30dovna))

Mary Beth Leigh spoke about a program—In a Time of Change (ITOC)—that began at Bonanza Creek LTER in 2007 with the goal of integrating scientific and artistic perceptions on the changing world of central Alaska. The program offers an exchange of perspectives from the arts, sciences and humanities and strives to create original work informed by that exchange. Previous events included workshops and field trips, culminating in similar events featuring visual, written and performance art in Fairbanks in recent years.

Leigh spoke mainly about the importance of fostering dialogue between the science and the arts/humanities; she gave credence to the "Ecological Reflections" Network, which seeks to "foster collaborations between place-based ecosystem science, arts and humanities, and foster increased awareness of our changing ecosystems." Artists, in collaboration with scientists, Leigh claimed, can "strengthen connections between society and ecosystems" and "improve science outreach to the public."

Sarah Trainor spoke about the latest effort to arise out of the ITOC program, called "In a Time of Change: The Art of Fire," a visual art project designed generate excitement, facilitate mutual understanding and promote meaningful dialogue on issues related to fire science and society. "In a Time of Change: The Art of Fire" is funded by the Joint Fire Science Program and was developed by the Alaska Fire Science Consortium (AFSC) and the Bonanza Creek Long Term Ecological Research Station (BNZ LTER).

Nine local Alaska artists were invited to embrace the inspiration of wildfire, fire science and fire management to create a unique art exhibit. Four field trips were organized giving artists a behind-the-scenes look at what happens when a fire occurs, how scientific information is used in management decisions, and the many facets behind long-term ecological disturbance studies. The field trip element was structured for two-way exchange, allowing all participants to become immersed in the environment.

"These experiences are valuable for scientists too because artists sometimes ask questions scientists hadn't really thought of, challenging them to articulate their findings and helping them remember to make the connection to the big picture," Mary Beth Leigh said.

### **Colleen Morton Busch**

*Colleen Morton Busch received her M.F.A. in poetry but writes and publishes fiction and nonfiction as well. A yoga student and Zen practitioner, Busch is the author of *Fire Monks: Zen Mind Meets Wildfire* (Penguin, 2011), a day-by-day account of the defense of Tassajara Zen Mountain Center against massive wildfires in summer 2008. Her work has appeared in *Yoga Journal*, where she was a senior editor, *Tricycle: A Buddhist Review*, *Shambhala Sun*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and numerous literary magazines, including *Willow Springs*, *Manoa*,*

*New Orleans Review, The Big Ugly Review, and Yellow Silk. She blogs for the Huffington Post and lives in Northern California with her husband.*

(A video of Colleen Morton Busch's talk can be found at [http://media.oregonstate.edu/index.php/show/?id=0\\_fof1he9z](http://media.oregonstate.edu/index.php/show/?id=0_fof1he9z))

Colleen Morton Busch told the story of a 2008 wildfire that threatened Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in California. The book called to mind Pyne's remarks about wildfire providing a naturally tense narrative, as Busch described how there was only one road in or out of the Center, hemmed by steep, flammable canyon walls. Yet unlike most such wildfire narratives, the story Busch told focused on the calm, Zen consensus in the face of urgency. As Ingalsbee pointed out later about her book, it was rare in that it focused on a success story.

The wildfire, according to Busch, was a rubber meets the road moment of Zen practice—how to use Zen practice while cutting a fire line? Wildfire provides a perfect example of something that demands attention in the moment, something that residents of the Zen Center aspired to (a sign above the kitchen read: "Wake up. Life is passing swiftly.") Monks believe that anything in life can be a teacher if you let it, and strive to make friends with their difficulties. Wildfire was their teacher.

Busch described how monks and firefighters have some similarities: they depend on one another; they pay attention to their surroundings; and they follow orders and precepts that guide one in paying attention, though in the end have to take responsibility for themselves.

There are significant differences, however. For one, the Zen monks were not "fighting" the fire, they "went out to 'meet' the fire," said Busch. The monks viewed the fire as a nuisance, not an enemy (this echoed Bill Anthony's comments about "winter storms"). In Zen, battle is not a useful approach to anything—it stokes anger or fear or conflict (this echoed Pyne's lines: "we can't just send in the troops and squash wildfire; this is an insurrection.") Instead of battling fear or anger or tension, monks believe it is better to let it move through you (this echoed Ingalsbee's call for "fire-permeable communities"). To the monks, fire was an energy that they were meeting, an energy that is both out there and within us. To the monks, there is no division between planet, fire, and humanity; there is no present that does not include the past or the future.

## **Panel discussion**

(A video of the panel discussion, facilitated by Dr. Kathleen Dean Moore, with Bill Anthony, Colleen Morton Busch, Dr. Tim Ingalsbee, Dr. Mary Beth Leigh, Dr. Stephen Pyne, Dr. Karin Riley, and Dr. Sarah Trainor, can be found at [http://media.oregonstate.edu/index.php/show/?id=0\\_0a0lrhrk](http://media.oregonstate.edu/index.php/show/?id=0_0a0lrhrk))

Pyne remarked how he was "overwhelmed by the marvelous mosaic of ideas and styles. We've "met" fire today in many forms. We've met it as literature, dance, narrative, painting, personal memoir, and even pyroganda." Pyne added that fire has to be approached from a multi-disciplinary perspective, because as opposed to the other earth elements—air, water, earth—fire has no academic department; the "only fire department in academia is the one

you call in an emergency.” Busch lauded the symposium’s “dynamic, multidimensional power of perception.”

All participants echoed the call to embrace the diversity of narratives—that we need to overwhelm the one (fire-as-destroyer) with the many. The USFS, for better or worse, has dominated wildfire messaging—we need to change that, one way or another, in part by creating alternate power structures, in part by listening and respecting other narratives and worldviews out there. It’s not a matter of transplanting one narrative or language-set for another (replacing negative terms with neutral scientific language or value-laden positive language), it’s a matter of expansion or multilingualism. Instead of insular academic and organizational bubbles we need community; communication through innumerable nodes.

New language and metaphors could arise from many sources. They could certainly come from art: “sculpting” the land, a “mosaic” landscape, “desire lines” (as Sarah Trainor mentioned in her talk). Ingalsbee spoke of his vision of a fire worker as a landscape artist, painting a burn mosaic with a driptorch, “sculpting snags.” New metaphors and language could also be drawn from medical language.

A top-down approach can work: a change in USFS terminology would filter down to firefighters, then to the media who hang onto firefighters words (Ingalsbee cited a study that placed firefighters as the public’s most credible source of information about wildfire), and then the public. But at the same time, and more importantly, panelists agreed, we need a grass-roots approach: a diverse, universal groundswell of new language rising from new and diverse community-based relationships with fire. This will rely on the Promethean act of bringing open flame back out of the forest and into our daily lives. We need rural communities involved in prescribed burns, fire-tourism, regional Burning Mans, etc. We need to begin to reenact with our landscape again. In the end, citizens need to decide what they want their public lands to be and how they should be managed. Once we decide on what we want our land to be, we can decide fire’s role on the land.

Much of how these new languages arise and are applied will depend on audience and purpose. All participants agreed that wildland fire is never culturally neutral—it is good or bad depending on values. Narratives and terminology are social constructs; for example, narratives depend on perspective: loss of home in WUI justifies “destructive” narrative; yet from the perspective of, say, a black-backed woodpecker, the “fire-use” narrative is justified.

To end on an optimistic note, Colleen Morton Busch mentioned a Zen adage: be grateful for your problems. This was echoed by Mary Beth Leigh, who stated that, all things considered, we are blessed to have the wildfire problem before us: this is a question of public land, and that is a blessing in itself.

All participants also agreed that it is important to have these diverse, face-to-face meetings; to pick one’s head out of its track, to step outside our insular worlds, to “create a world in which interdisciplinary exists.” In a fitting conclusion, Stephen Pyne, who for decades has been calling for humanities perspectives to enrich our engagement with fire, said that the symposium helped him “realize that I’m not alone,”

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*organizing committee consisted of Charles Goodrich (Director, Spring Creek Project), Fred Swanson (USFS Research Science, retired), Nathaniel Brodie (Spring Creek Project), Janean Creighton (NorthWest Fire Science Consortium), Garret meigs (OSU) and Chris Dunn (OSU.)*  
More information about The Spring Creek Project can be found on their website:  
<http://springcreek.oregonstate.edu/>.