

SPECIAL SECTION



WOMEN'S FOREST CONGRESS

COURTESY OF WOMEN'S FOREST CONGRESS

The inaugural Women's Forest Congress convened in Minneapolis on October 17–20, 2022.

This introduction to our special section commemorating that event is followed by the declaration approved at the end of the congress, reflections of four attendees (including a founder), and then two presentations given at the congress—one on the history of women in forest conservation and the other about the present and future roles of women in the forest sector.

BY JAMES G. LEWIS

WHY A WOMEN'S FOREST CONGRESS?

The Women's Forest Congress (WFC) is part of the rich tradition of forest congresses held in the United States. All eight congresses, which have been led or co-led by American Forests, the oldest citizen-led conservation organization in the United States, have been convened to address the forest issues of the day. (American Forests was called the American Forestry Association from its founding in 1875 until 1992.) The first American Forest Congress, held in 1882, helped launch the forest conservation movement. The second congress convened in 1905 to bring attention to deteriorating forest conditions. That one concluded with resolutions calling for the federal government to establish a national forest service and enact (or repeal) laws and policies that made sustainable forestry possible nationwide, which were followed up on over the next few years. This congress made forest conservation a national priority, thus transforming the relationship Americans have with their forests. The WFC organizers intend that the Eighth American Forest Congress, too, will launch a new movement that might, yet again, transform the relationship Americans have with their forests.

At the first six congresses, women had a minimal presence. This isn't surprising. Women weren't admitted to forestry schools until the 1930s and were rarely allowed to take field positions for several more decades. Those who did participate as delegates or appear on the program for the next three congresses weren't from the forest industry—they were leaders of the Garden Club of America or the General Federation of Women's Clubs and were given the opportunity to either present or speak from the floor about their organization's conservation activities.¹ At the third congress, in

1946, at which whether to regulate logging on private lands or not was hotly debated, Mrs. Max J. Schmitt of Wisconsin—the program didn't give her first name but identified her by her husband's name—spoke from the floor against regulation for the allotted ten minutes. At the fourth, in 1953, women were on the program for the first time—though it was just three. The fifth congress, held ten years later, represents another turning point. Plant pathologist Dr. Cynthia Westcott presented a talk entitled “The Sane Approach to Pesticide Use” on a panel about pesticides, a topic of great interest after the publication of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* the year before.

What the third through sixth congresses had in common, though, was they followed the same format and had similar outcomes: delegates attended plenary sessions and heard formal papers, and breakout sessions were by interest group. “Little hard debate occurred on the issues, the political forces driving them, or alternative ways of conceiving of forest policy,” according to one assessment.² And women had little input, say, or control over the agendas.

The seventh congress, in 1996, broke this mold. It was convened for the first time by the broader forestry community rather than American Forests. The congress was less about “crafting forest policy” and more about finding common ground and agreement about “understanding the things Americans are concerned about with the nation's forests,” according to one principal organizer.³ It engaged a wide variety of participants, including small private forest owners, community groups, urban forestry agencies, and minorities, especially Native Americans and African Americans. When reflecting on the seventh congress twenty years later, its executive director wrote, “One can imagine that once again a group of interests will pull together

to be strong enough to call for the Eighth Congress. The players will be different because of many changes in the balance of ownership and in the balance of national vs. local and regional voices.”⁴

Since then, the balance between men and women in land ownership and voices has changed, but twenty-five years after that congress, the numbers throughout the forest sector still favor men. Study after study has shown that women are scarce at every level of the forest sector—be it public, private, academic, or industry. In fact, though the past quarter-century has seen more women in forestry and more women landowners, the latest census data show that women account for less than one of every five positions in the forest sector⁵ and barely one in five forestland owners.⁶ Meanwhile, climate and forest conditions around the world have continued deteriorating.

The idea for the WFC germinated among women in the forestry community who believe the low workforce participation rate is leaving a serious gap in the sector, holding back participation by more women, and limiting opportunities to think about forests in new ways. Whether involved through landownership, industry, conservation, public agencies, or other roles, women in the forest sector are underrepresented. Addressing the gender diversity gap may create room for innovative problem solving to combat the most pressing challenges facing the forest sector and the forests to which all are connected.

The idea of addressing the low participation rate evolved into a forum to develop strategies and solutions for forests through a female lens. Building on the rich tradition of congresses—that of coming together with the intent to influence, if not transform, forestry in the United States—the WFC was founded in 2019 as an organization that would

offer a space for women from all over the world to bring about positive change across the forest sector. Today the WFC organization is open and inclusive—trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming participants are welcome, as are women of all ages, perspectives, cultural backgrounds, professional levels, abilities, and educational attainment. To deliver on its promises of connection, inclusivity, and innovation, the WFC organization takes a contemporary approach to representation that incorporates diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) to support the voices of women and their allies in shaping the future of forests. With equity and activism among its founding principles, the WFC and its participants have made a collective and individual commitment to DEI.

AT THE CONGRESS

In the runup to Minneapolis, quarterly meetings were held virtually to start building community and momentum for the congress, connect with others, and consider how actions informed by diverse perspectives could profoundly affect the future of forests. The first public gathering was on March 8, 2021—International Women's Day—and had more than 620 registrants from every U.S. state and Puerto Rico, 27 additional countries, and every continent. The turnout boded well for Minneapolis.

After more than two years of planning, over four days some five hundred Congress attendees from ten countries met to address the most pressing challenges for forests and women today and in the future. The focus was not exclusively on forestry knowledge, but the meeting did include opportunities for making connections and establishing a community that organizers intended as an inspiring and safe space for women to come together to address

the world's greatest forest sector challenges.

The structure and offerings at the congress reflected this strong sense of community building. Breakout sessions were designed to be more like collaborative workshops than presentations. Activation spaces—areas dedicated to specific activities—were provided to engage diverse learning styles, provide professional support and guidance, and foster creativity and collaboration in ways that addressed the full needs of attendees. Activation spaces included the Innovation Lab, Wellness Lounge, Career Exploration Experience, and Creativity Space and were intended to set a relaxed and inviting tone and foster a sense of community in which all were welcome.

This broad focus on building community was reflected in the five themes addressed at the congress and subsequently incorporated into the declaration: leadership for equity and inclusion; workforce opportunities for increasing recruitment, retention, and advancement; women as catalysts for change; addressing today's greatest forest challenges; and supporting each other. Thirty-nine delegates to the congress worked in groups based on the five WFC themes to create a declaration for attendees to vote on. The delegates had diverse perspectives, backgrounds, ages, and racial and ethnic identities. They were students and women working in academia, industry, public land management, and other roles in the forest and forest products sectors. In advance of the congress they reviewed and refined draft outcomes, measures of success, goals, and resolutions. During the congress,

delegates engaged with attendees, listened to presentations, and met for delegate-only deliberations to capture and suggest revisions and provide the final draft declaration for voting and approval on the final day. The approved declaration was shared publicly immediately following the congress.

The overriding goal of the WFC Declaration was to establish a shared vision for the future of women in forestry. To achieve that vision, the declaration includes calls to action. It challenges organizations in the forest and forest products sector to foster workforce opportunities, build a pipeline of talent, promote supportive and welcoming workspaces that make healthy lifestyles and lives a priority, work toward improving pay equity, and last but not least, “apply models and frameworks to generate and realize solutions to the greatest forest challenges that are built on women's strengths, such as inclusive, collaborative, and multi-scale holistic thinking.” The call to action asks the congress's participants, supporters, and partners “to commit themselves to advance the actions through their organizations, networks, partnerships, and spheres of influence.” Following approval of the declaration, the Women's Forest Congress adjourned.

It's too early to say whether the congress in Minneapolis will prove transformative, or on what scale. With the exception of the first two forest congresses, the others have had virtually no effect in part because they were meetings and not the beginning of movements. But by bringing together people from diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and racial and ethnic identities, by gathering

people at different stages of their careers in academia, industry, and other roles in the forest and forest products sector to discuss the need for transformation and provide new ideas and perspectives, the Women's Forest Congress has shown that the will to transform is immeasurable.

James G. Lewis is editor of Forest History Today. He thanks Elizabeth Woodworth, a cofounder of the Women's Forest Congress, for her assistance with this special section.

NOTES

1. Arthur V. Smyth, *Seventh American Forest Congress: Toward a Shared Vision. A Brief History of the American Forest Congresses* (Seventh American Forest Congress, 1995), 8.
2. William R. Bentley, “American Forest Congresses,” *Forests and Forestry in the Americas: An Encyclopedia* (2007), <https://sites.google.com/site/forestryencyclopedia/Home/American%20Forest%20Congresses>.
3. Bob Clausi, quoted in Rich Faltonson, “The Seventh American Forest Congress: What's Next?” *The Forestry Source*, December 1996, 10.
4. Bentley, “American Forest Congresses.”
5. Data USA, “Forest & Conservation Workers: Diversity,” <https://datausa.io/profile/soc/forest-conservation-workers>.
6. Between 2006 and 2013, the percentage of female forestland owners in the United States who owned more than 10 acres of forestland rose from 12 to 14 percent. By 2018 it was reported that 20.4 percent of all private forestland owners were female and that they owned about 50 million acres of forestland nationwide. See Jacqueline Miner, Puneet Dwivedi, Robert Izlar, Danielle Atkins, and Parag Kadam, “Perspectives of Four Stakeholder Groups about the Participation of Female Forest Landowners in Forest Management in Georgia, United States,” *PLoS ONE* 16(8): e0256654. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0256654>.