

The Women's Forest Congress: Working Toward Equity and Empowerment in the Forest Community

By Nissa Weisser

The Women's Forest Congress (WFC) was created in late 2019 to provide a forum to develop strategies and solutions for forests. Hundreds of women have come together in this space to share personal and professional experiences, connect with others, shape the latest innovations, and consider how actions informed by their perspectives can make a profound impact on the future of forests. The WFC is open and inclusive—trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming participants are welcome, as are women of all ages, perspectives, cultural backgrounds, professional levels, abilities, and education.



The WFC envisions a world where there is equity and empowerment in our forest community. The WFC acknowledges the importance of forests to us all and therefore calls attention to the existing disparities of women and especially women of color in the forest sector, whether involved through land ownership, industry, conservation, public agency, or other roles. In acknowledgment of this void, the WFC is creating an inclusive and safe space to connect, inspire and act as catalysts for change for the benefit of forests and all who rely on them, now and for the future.

“The challenges our sector faces—lack of racial and gender representation and equity, social acceptance of forestry, a growing disconnect from nature and natural resources, and climate change, to name just a few—need creativity, boldness, and innovation,” says Ara Erickson, vice president corporate sustainability at Weyerhaeuser, and a founding member of the WFC steering committee. “We need to be less afraid of change and more willing to try things differently.”

The WFC steering committee high-

ly values the perspectives of women and women of color in the forest sector. By welcoming multiple perspectives that are typically unequally represented, the WFC hopes to provide a model for future actions in the forest sector.

Since its inception, the WFC has quickly gained momentum. Women who are passionate about forests, whether personally or professionally, felt an immediate connection. The initial plan was to have an in-person summit in 2020, but the event was necessarily postponed with the onset of the pandemic. Undaunted, WFC's momentum carried on virtually, with the first WFC Pre-Congress Summit in July 2020. A direct result of the Pre-Congress Summit was the development of Working Groups made up of diverse members from across the for-



WOMEN'S FOREST CONGRESS

Since its creation nearly two years ago, the Women's Forest Congress has provided a forum for women around the world to connect around forestry and how they can influence the future of forests.



PHOTO COURTESY OF WOMEN'S FOREST CONGRESS

A reason for creating the Women's Forest Congress was to address the existing disparities of women and especially women of color in the forest sector. Women remain underrepresented in numerous ways, including in land ownership and jobs within industry, conservation, or public agencies.

est community—conservation groups, academia, Indigenous representatives, family forest landowners, government agencies, corporations, nature enthusiasts, and more. There are four Working Groups within the

WFC: Meeting Design and Logistics, Communications and Marketing, Stakeholder Engagement, and Content Development.

WFC continues to meet virtually throughout 2021. The first meetup

was held on International Women's Day (<https://www.internationalwomensday.com/>), March 8, 2021. The theme, *Inspire, Empower and Build Relationships* engaged more than 620 registrants coming from every US state and Puerto Rico, four Canadian provinces, 26 additional countries, and every continent except Antarctica. The event provided an opportunity to learn more about what's happening with the WFC, what's ahead, and be inspired by the work and leadership of women in natural resources.

"International Women's Day was by far an event for the books. Having the opportunity to facilitate with over 621 registrants with all US states represented, four Canadian provinces, and 26 countries from around the world was astonishing," says Dr. Antomia (Mia) Farrell, assistant dean for diversity at the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, Food and Environment and Past President of the National Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences (MANRRS). "I appreciate the Women's Forest Congress for giving me the space to be authentic and vulnerable while telling my story. The women I have met through the Women's Forest Congress have been amazing, and I appreciate the relationship that we have developed!" Dr. Farrell has facilitated the WFC's virtual meetings since they first began.

On June 8, through the *Get Together, Get Outside, and Let's Get Going* event, participants networked with colleagues and peers throughout the forest community. Guest speaker Lindsey Richter inspired the forum with how she uses her passion for the great outdoors and mountain biking to empower women to overcome fears and build confidence. Breakout sessions offered participants opportunities to connect with each other about their roles within the forest community, their passion for forests and their work, and how integral their roles are within the sector.

There are two more gatherings planned for 2021, September 8 and December 8. The WFC is currently in the process of choosing a date and location for the 2022 in-person event. *WOF*

Nissa Weisser is a recipient of the *Marion Berry Allbee Award from the University of Vermont and is the current Project & Client Relations Manager for Wood & Co., a boutique firm providing clients, including the Women's Forest Congress, with diverse consulting services, including environmental strategy, communications planning, content development, stakeholder relations, and strategic event planning.*

Women's Forest Congress

The WFC continues to thrive on its momentum and engage across the forest community.

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