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A catalyst for new visions

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“Fires of Change” spurred the partnered organizations to get together over two years ago—even before the historic Yarnell Fire in June, 2013.

The wealth of knowledge exchanged between the art and science communities represents a greater challenge to come. The hope is this project will encourage societal exploration of fire, as well as consortia around the country to develop further options and programs to express science through an artistic aperture.

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Barb Satink-Wolfson, Southwest Fire Science Consortium coordinator and NAU School of Forestry professor, said in a previous interview with the Daily Sun the idea stemmed from a similar collaboration between the Alaska Fire Consortium and the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

The SWFSC is a neutral partnership with the Joint Fire Science Program, and connects managers, scientists and policy makers in the interest of education and collaboration.

With a grant from the JFSP secured, Satink-Wolfson and fire ecologist, NAU School of Forestry professor and Consortium Principal Investigator Andi Thode approached the Flagstaff Arts Council with their plan.

The SWFSC also involved NAU's Landscape Conservation Initiative to facilitate the North Rim workshop and connect with Grand Canyon fire managers.

“Fires of Change” will be next year's Festival of Science art exhibition, and will run from Sept. 4 through Oct. 31. In funding a project like this, the Arts Council receives support from Coconino County, including use of the County-owned Coconino Center for the Arts; from supporters, sponsors and the City of Flagstaff.”

As of press time, two sponsors for “Fires of Change” have signed on—Full Circle Trade and Thrift and Freeman Huber Law—but more are anticipated in the coming months.

Additionally, Arts Council Executive Director John Tannous applied for and received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to assist the participating artists in “Fires of Change” with stipends for travel, work and material costs.

The impetus on the artistic side stemmed from the exemplary public reception of the 2012 “Beyond the Border” exhibition at CCA that Skabelund co-curated.

At the three-day Grand Canyon workshop, the fire managers and experts overseeing the workshop glossed over policy discussions and left some artists wondering.

Others like Skabelund wanted to hear more of the historical and cultural significance of fire exclusion and management. He listened to conversations in which the fire managers talked about funding streams and traced the parallel between Washington policymakers sending money to stanch immigration at the border and money allotted to the Fire Service to fight fire but not restore the forests.

“Throwing money and building the wall, just like we throw money into fighting fires instead of doing the necessary tasks that have to be done to get the forest so it's back to where it was before European-Americans arrived here,” Skabelund said.

Post-fire ecosystems specialist and LCI associate Collin Haffey noted there is an upward trend in the federal government vying for fire on the landscape.

"The changes in policy and interpretation in the last couple years have been another major step that have tipped that arrow up in a big way," Haffey said.

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