

Gore to address Aspen Forests at Risk event | #climate

Posted on December 29, 2010 by [Shiva](#)



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CTHB Board Member, Prof. Diana Six

Former Vice President and Nobel laureate Al Gore will join forest scientists and policy makers at a February symposium in Aspen focusing on climate change and forests of the American West.

The Feb. 18 event, Forests at Risk: Climate Change & the Future of the American West, will focus on a host of threats to western forests, all linked by a common denominator in climate change, according to John Bennett. He is executive director of the Aspen nonprofit For the Forest, organizer of the symposium.

For the Forest hosted its inaugural local symposium a year ago, focusing specifically on strategies for dealing with pine beetles and their impact on forest health in various locales, including Aspen. Gov. Bill Ritter was the keynote speaker.

The 2011 event will look beyond the pine beetle, which has decimated vast stands of lodgepole pines in Colorado and other western states, and delve into the root causes of various threats to forest health. Insect epidemics, disease and increased wildfire risk are among them, said Bennett, who predicted a sobering look at what's happening to the forests of the West. He believes the symposium will be the first event of its kind to address the topic.

"It all, in the opinion of the scientists, is tied to the world getting warmer," Bennett said.

Gore is the author of “Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit” and “An Inconvenient Truth,” which was turned into an Academy Award-winning documentary about his campaign to educate citizens about global warming. In 2007, he shared the Nobel Peace Prize with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, of which Canadian research scientist Werner Kurz was a member. Kurz, too, will be among the symposium’s speakers.

The nature of Gore’s remarks have not yet been revealed. But Kurz’s research focuses on the impacts of natural disturbances, forest management and land-use change on “forest carbon budgets” — the absorption of carbon dioxide by live trees versus the emission of carbon dioxide by dead trees and the climate implications posed by swings in that balance.

Also a keynote speaker at the symposium will be Harris Sherman, U.S. undersecretary of agriculture, whose office oversees the U.S. Forest Service. Sherman was tentatively scheduled to participate in the December 2009 symposium, but was unable to make it. He is confirmed as a February attendee and will lead off the symposium, followed by a series of speakers and panel discussions that culminate with Gore’s closing address.

The roster of speakers also includes Craig Allen, a research ecologist with the U.S. Geological Survey, who conducts research on the ecology and environmental history of western landscapes. He is the lead author, with 19 other scientists, of a paper on drought- and heat-induced tree mortality.

Also scheduled to speak are: Tom Cardamone, executive director of the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies; Linda Joyce, a quantitative ecologist for the U.S. Forest Service who has focused on the impacts of climate change on ecosystems; and Phillip van Mantgem, a research ecologist for the U.S. Geological Survey who has concluded that unmanaged, old forests of the West are dying at twice the rate they were two or three decades ago.

* Diana Six, a professor of forest entomology and pathology at the University of Montana; * Tom Swetnam of the University of Arizona, who uses tree-ring research to study changes in climate and forest disturbances; and Jim Worrall, a plant pathologist with the U.S. Forest Service whose studies include sudden aspen decline and other diseases, will also participate.

The symposium will take place on the Friday of President’s Day weekend, an opportune time to bring “movers and shakers” to Aspen and shine a spotlight on the subject matter, said Bennett. He hopes the event spawns similar symposiums around the West and in Washington, D.C.

“The goal of all of this ... is to begin to frame the national debate about climate change in a way that is more personal and in a way that helps people understand how it affects their lives,” Bennett said. “This is not just about melting ice in Antarctica or endangered polar bears — this is about what’s happening in your back yard.

“Sometimes it takes something happening in your back yard to make people sit up and pay attention.”

The symposium may be short on providing specific solutions, but Bennett hopes drawing attention to the link between forest health and climate change, and the alarming implications of dying forests, helps spur individuals to act, even if it’s in small ways — addressing tree

health on their property, contributing to forest conservancy organizations, pushing for national legislation, or doing their part to reduce their use of fossil fuels, for example.

For the Forest, funded by contributions from within the Roaring Fork Valley, pursues both education, through events like the symposium, and actions on the ground, including joining as a partner in a beetle project on Smuggler Mountain near Aspen and in reclamation of mine tailings outside of Aspen through the use of biochar — a product that could be made from Colorado's beetle-killed trees. Biochar is touted as a beneficial soil additive that locks in carbon from whatever biomass is used to produce it.

The Forests at Risk symposium will take place from 12:45-5:30 p.m. at the Doerr-Hosier Center on the Aspen Institute campus. Tickets are \$15, but For the Forest plans to offer free spots for area students and environmental science teachers. The audience capacity will be about 400 people.

Go to www.aspenhowtix.com for tickets, and to www.fortheforest.org for more on the organization.

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