

## From the President's Desk

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### **"The World is Flat"**

When I was the Fire Staff Officer on the Ochoco National Forest in Central Oregon, our Regional Fire Director was a fella named David Jay. At many of our fire management meetings, Dave would start off by saying that "I've just read a good book." It usually had nothing to do directly with wildfires, but always helped us take an outside look at our world, and often times find new and innovative ways to look at our jobs.

It's been a lotta years since I heard about Dave's latest "read", and now I find myself in a position to tell others in the fire management world that "I've just read a good book."

I've just finished reading "The World is Flat: a Brief History of the Twenty-First Century" by Thomas Friedman, the Pulitzer Prize winning columnist for the New York Times. Not exactly the kind of background that lends itself to the wildland fire game, right? But Mr. Friedman looks at the globalization of our world, where the flattening of the world allows us all to work in a common marketplace without regard to national borders.

So, how does this relate to the world of wildland fire?

For many years, the border between Canada and the US was relatively "seamless" when it came to wildfires: any new ignition was attacked by the closest forces, without worrying about cost reimbursements or stamps on respective passports. In the mid-80's, large fires in Canada resulted in requests for support from US Interagency Hotshot crews; the interchange of personnel continued on throughout the 1990's, and escalated to a higher level in 2000 when entire Canadian Incident Management Teams, as well as 90 fire managers from Australia and New Zealand came to the US to help out on the "mega-fires" burning in Montana and Idaho.

Since then, the exchange of fire folks has continued between Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the US, and it looks like there's no end in sight.

Several factors that are critical to the continued interchange of personnel between countries are fire qualifications and personal protective equipment. Whenever folks cross borders, it is essential (from both the safety and liability perspectives) that everyone involved meets the appropriate levels of fire quals, and is using PPE that meets the minimum protection need on wildfires.

Enter Thomas Friedman, and his thoughts about "standardization" in a flat world.

Some folks (and agencies, too) believe that national and international standards can stifle their ability to innovate and meet their specific local needs. Friedman quotes the head of IBM's strategic planning unit, Joel Cawley, who says that "standards don't eliminate innovation, they just allow you to focus it." The introduction of National Fire Protection Association standards for the US wildland fire forces (NFPA 1977 for PPE and NFPA 1051 for qualifications) has moved cooperation and interoperability ahead during the past 15 years. The provinces and territories of Canada have experienced similar results through the Canadian General Standards Board (CGSB), and now the entire international community is moving forward with the development of standards for PPE using the International Standards Organization (ISO) as the platform. Everyone has a seat at the table, and the results will result in products that meet an acceptable minimum standard that allows for cross-border support when needed during fire emergencies.

As an international Association with members around the world, IAWF strongly endorses the concepts of standardization where ever and whenever it is feasible for the folks involved, be it at the local, provincial/state, regional, national or international levels. Achieving a workable standard, such as ISO, CGSB or NFPA, requires the active participation of knowledgeable and capable individuals, with strong organizational commitment and support. Here's your chance to make a difference: go for it!