



## **From Exchange to Action: How IAFC’s International Fire Department Exchange Helped Ignite a Global Wildfire Movement**

In 2025, the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) convened a global fire service community during the International Fire Department Exchange (IFDX), an annual gathering designed to forge global partnerships among fire service leaders.

One of the most powerful outcomes of the IFDX is the relationships and partnerships that continue to strengthen over time. Since its inception, the IFDX has connected fire leaders from nine countries, Australia, Canada, Greece, Kenya, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America, to share their successes, challenges, and opportunities in wildfire management.

Wildfires are no longer seasonal. Across continents, fire agencies are facing longer fire seasons, more volatile fuels, and increasingly complex operational conditions. As Craig Hope, UK National Wildfire Capability Advisor and past IFDX participant, explains, “Wildfire is an international challenge that demands collaboration and innovation. An idea developed during the IFDX brought together two needs: providing firefighters with exposure to live fire and improving community resilience through strategic fire breaks.”

The IFDX plays an instrumental role in addressing key issues within the global wildfire paradigm, including safe and effective response, evacuations, partnerships, fuels management, outreach and education, data tools, and barriers to entry. A 2025 IFDX participant, Johann Breytenbach, General Manager of Wildfire Management at the Free State Umbrella Fire Protection Association in South Africa, took the IFDX concept home and created his own knowledge-exchange and skills-transfer event, “The Great Feral Burn-Off.”

The Great Feral Burn-Off is a high-tempo, live-fire practical workshop designed to maximize field time in a short period. Participants rotate through repeated operational cycles, brief, plan, execute, and debrief, building experience through real ignition and holding opportunities, combined with structured fire behavior learning and suppression fundamentals. Hosted in South Africa and supported by the Rural Africa Fire Alliance, the Burn-Off was a working fireground from May 16 to May 31, 2026. Johann explains, “Everybody has got experience, everybody has got something to give, that if you put it all together, then solutions are found.”

Three former participants of the IFDX program attended the event: Craig Hope, UK National Wildfire Capability Advisor, Flo Mwatete, firefighter from Kenya, and Fábio Silva, professor and instructor at Nova University Lisbon and the National School of Firefighters of Portugal. Reflecting on her experience, Mwatete observed: “When people come together with a common purpose, fire becomes more than a tool; it becomes a force for learning. What

began, for me, as a participant in the IFDX has become a global gathering of passion, knowledge, and purpose.”

Participants engage directly in operational burning and fire line tactics, cross-border knowledge exchange, community-based fire management strategies, and real-time decision-making in dynamic fire environments. This immersive approach creates a learning environment unlike anything else in the global fire service. Fábio describes, “When technical expertise meets ancestral and traditional knowledge, learning occurs in coordination. The exchange between experienced practitioners and local communities creates a richer and more sustainable understanding of fire.” He continues, “As fire itself becomes more recognized as a natural and integral component of the landscape, interventions can be implemented within a socio-environmental harmony that benefits both people and ecosystems.”

[LINK TO VIDEO](#)

If you are interested in learning more about the Great Feral Burn-Off, view these resources.

- [Link to Documents](#)

If you are interested in learning more about the IFDX program, please contact IAFC Program Coordinator, Killian Gause, at [kgause@iafc.org](mailto:kgause@iafc.org)