



Getting down to earth

THE TOP GEOLOGISTS ARE ON THEIR WAY. WRITES ANTHONY MARX

IT'S fondly known as the Olympics for geologists. Since 1878, the world's most learned geoscientists have gathered for a major conference somewhere around the globe every four years – except, of course, during the world wars.

Sydney hosted the event in 1976 but now it's Brisbane's turn to showcase the 34th International Geological Congress.

In the biggest conference in Brisbane this year, more than 5000 delegates from 112 countries are set to converge on the Brisbane Convention & Exhibition Centre for five days starting August 5.

They will occupy all but two of the 44 event spaces and meeting rooms in the expanded convention centre, which unveiled a \$140 million upgrade in January with an additional 25,000sq m of space.

Those attending – a mix of resource industry figures, academics and government officials – are forecast to spend about \$606 a day, pumping more than \$18 million into the state economy.

Senior ministers from several countries are scheduled to address the conference, which will feature presentations from 3232 speakers, a sold-out exhibition space with 268 displays and numerous book launches. Another 1100 papers will be presented as scientific posters.

Among those speaking will be well-known TV presenter and Scottish geologist Iain Stewart and former Shell chairman Lord Ron Oxburgh.

A highlight is expected to be the release of a new survey map of mineral and energy-rich Russia, China and Mongolia, which was 10 years in the making.

Congress president Neil Williams, a former chief executive of Geoscience Australia, describes the selection of Brisbane to play host as "quite a coup".

"In the geological world, it's a big deal. This is a great opportunity and a big deal for Australia," Professor Williams says.

"It really is a testament to the quality of the facilities. When voting delegates saw all the material on the convention centre, they were pretty impressed. It's a world-class facility."

Prof Williams says the congresses have traditionally had a very academic focus but each country is free to put their own spin on proceedings.

With Australia's resources boom at full tilt, about 40 per cent of the program will focus on mining and energy issues. "Obviously there will be a lot of other related geological things, such as hazards, earthquakes, volcanoes, landslides and tsunamis. There will be some discussion on the latest advances in fossils and paleontology, as well as the climate change debate," Prof Williams says.

Another emerging big issue is waste disposal, particularly from nuclear power stations and carbon sequestration.

The Chinese contingent will be the biggest by far, with 758 delegates scheduled to attend – more than twice as many as the second-ranked US, with 305.

Notably, rising powers Brazil and India are also sending large delegations to the congress, which has been entitled "Unearthing our Past and Future – Resourcing Tomorrow".

With Europe's economic woes and debt crisis worsening, the Italian Government backed out of space on the exhibition floor, conference organiser Ashley Gordon says.

Having overseen 400 major conferences since starting his Brisbane-based business in 1985, Mr Gordon says the geological congress is easily the most complicated one he has seen.





The conference handbook alone is 354 pages long. "Nothing comes near it in terms of presentations," he says. "This one is the grand-daddy of them all."

As serious as the conference will be, numerous social functions have been scheduled and participants will be entertained by a team of world champion sand sculptors. Working with several tons of sand in a 6m x6m pit in the centre of the exhibition hall, the sculptors will create a different work each night.

A program of 36 pre and post-conference field trips have also been organised to sites across Australia, Papua New Guinea and Malaysia for more than 600 participants.

Visiting mining operations, the Great Barrier Reef, dinosaur fields in western Queensland and local geological attractions such as the Glass House Mountains are among the most popular.

Like the Olympics, the process of choosing host cities is hard-fought.

Bidding for the Brisbane congress started in 2002 and took a decade for it to be realised. Other recent host cities include Oslo, Florence and Rio de Janeiro.

With the next conference set for Cape Town, South Africa, in 2016, a tussle has emerged between Canada and India to host the congress in 2020.

Who will win? Stay tuned.



DIG IT: Iain Stewart will be speaking at the 34th International Geological Congress.

BY THE NUMBERS

34th

INTERNATIONAL GEOLOGICAL CONGRESS

3232

SPEAKERS

268

DISPLAYS

\$18m

BOOST TO ECONOMY

5000+

REGISTERED DELEGATES FROM 112 COUNTRIES, INCLUDING 1478 AUSTRALIANS