Opening Session
by Ian Crawford

There was a feeling of a homecoming for the geothermal energy industry at the GRC Annual Meeting & GEA Geothermal Energy Expo. The biggest annual meeting in the sector had a celebratory atmosphere as the geothermal energy world came together again in Reno, “the biggest little geothermal city in the world!” Our colleagues felt welcomed at the Peppermill Resort Spa and Casino, the only resort in the United States whose heating source is totally provided from geothermal energy produced on the immediate property. Old friends greeted each other and looked forward to making new friends and contacts over the next few days.

The latest edition of the GRC Annual Meeting and GEA Geothermal Energy Expo was held in late September in Reno, Nevada, USA.

Over 1,200 attendees from 25 countries around the world came together in the “Biggest Little City in the World” and by all accounts had a successful and enjoyable meeting.

We will document the meeting in two parts. In this issue we will report on the Opening Session, the Golf Tournament and one of the Field Trips. In the January/February GRC Bulletin we will write about the GRC Awards, other GRC Fieldtrips, the Student Leadership Luncheon, the Poster and Technical Session awards and the winners of the 36th Geothermal Photo Contest.

The first full day of the GRC Annual Meeting offered an opportunity to get the latest updates on the global geothermal energy industry at the Opening Session.
Nevada Governor Brian Sandoval greeted the meeting saying the importance of geothermal power production in the State of Nevada is well known. The Silver State recently exceeded 30 years of geothermal power generation with 2014 production of 2.742 million net MWh. This is enough to power 247,000 Nevada households. “Congratulations to all for achieving this important and impressive milestone.”

“Nevada is home to numerous geothermal and other renewable energy projects” said Steve Ponder, Executive Director of the GRC. “Geothermal, in addition to generating electricity, generates jobs and property tax revenues for local counties.”

Joe Greco, Geothermal Energy Association (GEA) board chairman and Terra-Gen Power senior vice president, outlined five reasons to be optimistic about geothermal in the U.S.

He cited good news about The Production Tax Credit saying “it puts [geothermal] on a level playing field with other renewables.” He praised the Energy Policy Modernization Act of 2015 which if it becomes law, will effectively set national goals and investment in geothermal technology development as well as expedite exploration. Joe trumpeted the California Renewable Portfolio Standard “which increases from where we are today at 23% to 50% by 2030, and has given a huge market opportunity for geothermal.” He said the FORGE Initiative “will help enhance technologies and research that will help overall in the industry,” and that the U.S. Clean Power Plan could open new markets for geothermal.

U.S. Geothermal CEO Dennis Gilles also called for “leveling the playing field” with wind and solar. “We’re competing with the wind and solar companies,” Gilles said. “They have incentives, and as a result of their dramatic growth, they have seen their costs come down dramatically.”
Gilles said that until the incentives change for the wind and solar industries, and until there is additional growth or technological breakthroughs in the geothermal energy industry that allows geothermal producers to lower costs, the geothermal industry is going “to continue to be challenged.”

According to Gilles, success for geothermal projects comes down to securing power purchase agreements. Gilles said that U.S. Geothermal is attempting to negotiate power purchase agreements for a handful of projects, but the company has seen setbacks due to the drop in solar pricing. “The response that we get from the [municipal utilities] or the community choice aggregators for the utilities is, ‘why should we buy geothermal if we could buy solar for so cheap?'”

According to Gilles, geothermal companies must demonstrate to potential customers that geothermal energy is a premier product.

Isaac Angel, CEO of Ormat Technologies said the geothermal energy industry needed to have a strong voice and a common vision. He said there was a misconception of geothermal by decision makers. For example, he noted that although some U.S. states had full Renewable Portfolio Standard (RPS) compliance, many others had little or no RPS standards. He blamed inconsistent support from the U.S. government in Washington D.C. for a lack or real progress across the country.