



## Opportunities and Prospects of Mobilizing the Public Opinion in the Region for Promotion of Wildfire Prevention Activities

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### Introduction

This is what one of the first foresters appointed in Priamurski Krai wrote in his “Correspondences from the Far East” (Forest Journal Number 1, 1890): *“Here, in Priamurski Krai, forest fires are raging, destroying vast forest areas. This evil is difficult, and sometimes impossible to fight even there, in Russia, where the population is relatively dense; what can we expect here, in Zabaikalie, where the population is extremely sparse..., in addition to this, the people have a habit of treating the forest carelessly, of seeing in it something that is not bad, but good to destroy; where trappers make burnings to destroy the deadfall to see the animals better – it is clear that these burnings burn out not only the deadfall, but also the forest; where former convicts are settled, who can enjoy destroying something, with some kind of dullness and just for the sake of satisfying the instinct of destroying; where lack of precautions is ruling everywhere; there this evil is a hundred times harder to fight than in Russia. However, the Governor-General and many others think that, with four foresters appointed here, the fires will be stopped or, at least, will significantly decrease. I fear, we will not be able to justify this hope.”*

More than 100 years passed since that time, and forest fire statistics for the Russian Far East as a whole and for Khabarovsk Krai and Sakhalinskaya Oblast specifically, show that the fears of the first forester were not groundless. The attitude of the people to forest has not changed much. As before, the overwhelming majority of fires appear due to the “lack of precautions that is ruling everywhere”. Therefore, this is still a pressing problem today.

Forest fire statistics for Russia demonstrates that only a negligible number of fires can be attributed to natural reasons. This fact by itself allows us to speak with confidence about the effectiveness of forest fire prevention through changing people’s behaviour in the forest. Of course, it is impossible to put an end to the problem of forest fires solely through public outreach, without any efforts in improving forest fire fighting. But it is also evident that there is a limit, beyond which equipping forest service units with fire-extinguishing means does not give the expected effect.

The FOREST Project, funded by the U.S. Agency of International Development, is working in Khabarovsk and Primorski Krai, Sakhalinskaya and Irkutskaya Oblasts and in Krasnoyarski Krai three years already. Prevention of human-caused forest fires is one of the four major project components. Within this period the project has gained significant experience in community outreach and identified the problems that hinder in placing this work on a broad footing – and this is what we are going to share with you.

### FOREST Project Achievements

The FOREST Project is implementing an integrated approach to forest fire prevention awareness activities among the citizens. It incorporates three interdependent trends: 1) general awareness and

targeted groups educational campaigns; 2) development of Fire Prevention Awareness Program for Pre-school and School aged Children; 3) strengthening foresters' communication skills/community participation.

With a view to obtain initial data necessary for development of the general awareness campaign that would cover broad sections of the population, a baseline public opinion polling/audience research was conducted in Khabarovski Krai and then in Krasnoyarski Krai and Sakhalinskaya Oblast. This research allowed to classify the goals and motives for visiting the forests, reveal the level of awareness and attitudes of the people to the problem of forest fires and discover habitual behavioural patterns of the citizens in the forest. This data made the basis of FOREST Project general awareness campaigns.

The follow-up focus-group research made an exact "portrait" of various community groups and identified the risk groups, i.e. those sections of the population through which forest fires are caused most frequently. This work made it possible to conduct targeted campaigns aimed at changing behaviours of selected groups of forest visitors. The first targeted campaigns were directed towards hunters and fishermen in Khabarovski Krai, wild plants collectors near Khabarovsk and picnickers in Krasnoyarski Krai. Since only the knowledge of the audience can bring about marked changes in the situation, special studies by experts and preliminary tests were conducted with the aim to develop the symbols and fire prevention materials for the general awareness campaigns – video and radio spots, tip sheets and posters.

Special fact sheets were published, where actual facts relating to the impact of forest fires on the economy, environment and health of the people in the Russian Far East and Siberia were gathered by forestry, economics, ecology and medicine experts and various aspects of this impact were popularized. All in all 26,000 fact sheets, 2.5 million tip sheets and 45,000 posters were distributed. Since these materials became highly popular, we think it advisable to continue these activities in the future.

Within the scope of this component also eight forest recreation areas were developed in all regions covered by the project. Today they are receiving their visitors. Seven two-sided billboards (18 m<sup>2</sup> each) were installed at interregional roads with highest traffic capacity. The project designed various types of souvenirs – badges, pendants, stickers and shawls with fire prevention symbols and is distributing them. Six sets of Tiger and Bear costumes were made for the conduct of community events.

Public participation is a decisive factor in implementing general awareness programs. Our experience shows that forest management bodies must bear the primary responsibility for this work and mobilize the community for the fulfilment of this task. 331 workers of Federal Forest Service from 232 leskhozoes (Forests) attended trainings organized by the project staff. Knowledge, skills and fire prevention materials that they received helped them to improve general awareness activities in their communities.

The project developed "a network of partners", which comprises organizations and individuals interested in fire prevention, and keeps a permanent dialogue with them, sends out fact sheets and updates information on the project web-site. Fire prevention materials can be sent out to everybody who needs them for implementation of awareness programs, irrespective of how remote the location of the initiative group or organization is. The circle of partners today comprises about 2,000 people in all five project regions. Sixteen non-governmental organizations (NGOs) participate in the work.

Mass media is an important project partner. Local TV and radio companies are running six video and five audio public service announcements of the FOREST Project on donated air-time. The companies also prepare fire prevention reports and use fire danger level data supplied by the project and its partners in local weather forecasts and news programs.

School teachers who attended our training seminars are educating and encouraging their students in forest fire prevention behaviour and also involve the children in tip sheets distribution and community events. Each of these students brought his new knowledge into the family and shared his new skills with friends and neighbours. More than 700 educators attended FOREST fire prevention seminars on School Aged Children Program, where 5,000 copies of this Program were distributed. Over 7,500 schoolchildren were trained in fire prevention based on this Program. Regional departments of the Ministry of Education, institutes for advanced training and school teachers express their appreciation

for the School Aged Children Fire Prevention Program. In response to their request an adapted version of this Program for kindergartens was issued and is distributed now.

Our experience shows that the wider the circle of partners is in the region or in a community, the more sustainable results can be achieved. The project is planning to transfer the contact base to specialized centers that will be established at Forest Service in each territory and to assist the centers in disseminating the information.

Of course, the results of this work cannot become apparent instantaneously. As we can see from the foreign experience, with regular general awareness activities conducted, change in behaviors and attitudes of people takes place in decades. Nevertheless, results of check polling in Khabarovski Krai showed that in one year about 90% of people became familiar and were able to remember some elements of the implemented campaigns and 18% declared that they have changed at least one aspect of their behaviour in the forest within this period.

Summing up the results of three-year activities, we would like to draw your attention to the following conclusions:

- The people are not fully aware of the consequences of forest fires and they do not know the behaviour rules in the forest. Therefore target work with various social, age and professional groups is necessary. Fire prevention work with children and young people is particularly promising and fruitful.
- The citizens did not reach that stage of civil society development, self-organization and well-being, where they could independently advocate their interests, including those in fire prevention.
- Many public organizations and public representatives today are ready for implementation of fire prevention awareness programs, provided that this work is coordinated and financially supported.
- However, only governmental structures are allowed to fulfil coordinating functions and provide financing for this work today.
- Implementation of regular fire prevention awareness activities among the citizens requires identification of structures and persons responsible for its implementation and coordination, as well as existence of a legal base, developed methodology and stable financing.

### **Institutionalization of Fire Prevention Awareness Activities**

As three-year experience of the FOREST Project shows, regular fire prevention awareness activities among the citizens cannot be implemented without respective laws and norms, stable finance and institutionalization. Furthermore, principles of financing and determination of structures responsible for the conduct of these activities must be fixed in normative acts - in Forestry Code in the first place. How does the acting Forestry Code treat these issues?

Clause 46 of 1997 Forestry Code attributes development, approval and implementation of federal forest protection programs to the authority of the Russian Federation.

Clause 47 attributes the same functions relating to territorial (regional) state programs to the authority of RF entities. The same clause attributes "organization of educational and awareness activities among the citizens in the sphere of forest management, protection and reforestation" to the authority of the subjects of the RF.

Clause 93 specifies that the Government of Russia, the federal forest management body and its territorial bodies shall provide fire fighting measures. The same clause says that forest fire protection, including fire prevention, shall be implemented by leskhozoes, forest protection air bases and other structures of the federal forest management body.

Clause 96 specifies that volunteer forest brigades can be established for prevention and extinguishing of forest fires. Financing procedures for such brigades shall be established by the bodies of state power of the Subjects of the RF. Clause 102 says that citizens and organization can participate in forest protection.

Clause 100 treats in detail participation of the bodies of state power of the Subjects of the RF in organization of fire fighting. These bodies are also entrusted with planning of fire prevention measures, conduct of fire prevention awareness activities and collaboration with mass media.

However, clause 108 charges fire fighting expenses to the account of the federal budget.

This means that all powers and responsibilities of territorial forest management bodies in terms of forest fire prevention and extinguishing can be implemented solely through target financing by the federal budget. Neither the federal budget nor the budgets of RF entities allocate any money for fire prevention in general and awareness activities among the citizens in particular though.

Therefore, provisions of the Forestry Code relating to forest fire prevention awareness activities among citizens cannot be implemented today due to the following factors:

- Unclear wording of rights and responsibilities of the federal structures, their territorial bodies and bodies of state power in the Subjects of the RF in terms of fire prevention awareness activities;
- Lack of respective institutions;
- Lack or shortage of target financing.

The draft of the new Forest Code submitted by MNR (Ministry of Natural Resources) to the Russian Government on 19 August 2003 inspires no optimism with regard to above.

Clause 15 specifies that the RF does not develop and implement state forest protection programs now, but only exercises “federal control” over protection of the forest fund, which is the federal property (and this is virtually all forest fund, see clause 19) and establishes respective procedure.

The authority of RF entities and municipal structures comprises protection of forests which are the property of these entities and structures (in accordance with the new Code these are only city forests, moreover - not all of them).

Thus, if in the previous Code the responsibility for forest fire prevention was unclear, now it is not determined at all.

Clause 77 specifies that implementation of forest protection measures shall be provided by the Russian Government or duly authorized federal body or its territorial bodies, bodies of state power in the Subjects of the RF, bodies of local self-government, within their competence. With regard to the previous two clauses – by nobody.

Clause 78. Among the numerous rights and responsibilities of Federal Forest Service officials this clause does not provide forest fire prevention awareness activities among the citizens, neither does it provide prevention of other forest violations though.

Clause 83. Bodies of state power of the Subjects of the RF are entrusted with all fire prevention awareness activities and work with mass media – with threefold reduction of the income from forest taxes (clause 108).

Clause 97. Financing. Forest fire fighting (not fire prevention!) shall be financed, as before, from the federal budget.

Among the normative documents existing in RF entities regulating various aspects of forest fire prevention and community outreach we can mark out the Khabarovski Krai Forest Code and Concept of Fire Prevention Awareness Activities Among the Citizens of Khabarovski Krai.

The provisions of Khabarovski Krai Forest Code show the powers of the Krai government, regional administrations, citizens, duly authorized federal forest management bodies, as well as of public organizations to conduct fire prevention awareness activities among the citizens. Thus, clause 55 stipulates “organization of educational and awareness activities among the citizens in the sphere of forest management, protection and reforestation”; “provision of forest management, protection and reforestation information to the citizens” within the authority of Krai Administration.

Clause 56 of Khabarovski Krai Forest Code also specifies “organization of educational and awareness activities in the sphere of forest management, protection and reforestation” within the powers of regional authorities.

The rights of the citizens living in the Krai were not forgotten, and clause 89 specifies that “Citizens, who enter into forest legal relations, are obliged: ... to promote forest ecological education of the young generation.”

Clause 90 specifies the powers of public organizations in forest preservation, specifically, they are granted the rights “to develop, approve and promote their forest preservation programs, to advocate the rights and interests of citizens and communities in terms of forest preservation...”

Clause 104 that stipulates participation of Krai Administration and bodies of local self-government in organization of forest fire fighting also says: “...Krai Administration together with the bodies of local self-government shall organize fire prevention awareness activities, regular highlighting of forest preservation issues in the mass media, as well as of the issues of adherence to fire safety and sanitary rules in the forests.”

The Krai Forest Code makes it possible to team the efforts of local authorities, public organizations and citizens in planning forest fire and emergency prevention measures in the Krai. However, there is no actual interaction between them due to lack of coordination between the governing entities, passivity of the citizens and low efficiency of activities implemented by public organizations.

When planning the annual Krai budgets, the Krai Duma that approved the Krai Forest Code does not allocate financial resources for forest protection and reforestation measures. The members of the parliament ignore these provisions of the Code and think that, under the Forest Code of RF, Federal forest management bodies shall be responsible for the problem of forest fires.

Concept of Fire Prevention Awareness Activities Among the Citizens in Khabarovski Krai developed by Krai Forest Management Department in 1997, is an auxiliary document, which was formally terminated in 2001, however did not lose its urgency in terms of public outreach and forest fire prevention.

This document provided a differentiated approach to various community groups with application of specific types of influence over the audience. The Concept specified the scope of public consciousness formation work, coordinating bodies and their functions, sources of finance and logistics, priming of participants and priority measures. The Concept, though developed six years ago, is still urgent and, after finalizing and application of FOREST Project experience, could serve as a basis for the new document that would consolidate managing entities on all levels and the community for the conduct of forest fire prevention measures.

Thus, the forest fire prevention system in RF entities today is not provided with a clear legal, institutional and financial base. Some experts believe that shift of the center of gravity into RF entities and their empowerment and allocation of financial resources would be the best way to solve this task. Forest taxes shall become the source of such resources. This will increase the responsibility of RF entities for the condition of the forests and raise their interest in the amount of forest income.

The FOREST Project is ready and is planning to team the efforts of federal, kraï and regional authorities and mobilize public organizations, citizens and experts to develop the new Concept and introduce it into the forest management practices. We suggest discussing specific steps that can be made in this direction at a section meeting during this workshop.