



**GFMC Address to the 10th Anniversary of Avialesookhrana's Air Fleet
Avialesookhrana Headquarters, Pushkino, 15 September 2004**

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Dear colleagues and friends!

Today is an important event to which the Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC) has been kindly invited. I would like to take the opportunity of the celebration of the 10th Anniversary of the establishment of *Avialesookhrana's* own air fleet to reflect on the developments of the last decade. It is more than one decade ago when I first visited your country in 1991. In this first official visit of Western wildland fire specialists after the end of the Cold War I travelled together with Professor Stephen J. Pyne, the most prominent fire historian of the world. We were hosted by *Avialesookhrana* and visited the most important fire regions of your country, starting in Leningrad Oblast and ending in the Far East. For the first time I was able to understand that the size of Russia's forest land, its magnificent beauty and its ecology are unique in the world. Russia's forests do not only have an economic potential for the country. The forests are home of biodiversity and people, and they store large amounts of terrestrial carbon. Natural fires have shaped the forests over millennia, and many species have fairly well adapted to natural fire regimes. However, forest fires have a potential of destruction. In the early 1990s it became clear that the combination of economic changes, social instability, and the effects of climate variability may lead to extreme fire situations. Climate change predictions also indicated that increase of temperatures, combined with prolonged and drier fire seasons, would lead to extreme fire behaviour and fire damages.



Andrey Eritsov translating the speech of J.G. Goldammer at the celebration of the 10th Anniversary of *Avialesookhrana's* Air Fleet. Photo: *Avialesookhrana*.

Immediately after my first visit we prepared the first joint East-West conference "Fire in Ecosystems of Boreal Eurasia", conducted in partnership with the Sukachev Institute of Forest, Krasnoyarsk, and supported by *Avialesookhrana*. Together with Dr. Valentin V. Furyaev we organized this first joint meeting of forest fire scientists and the fire management communities that had been separated by the Cold War over decades. Supported by Nikolay Alexeevich Kovalev, former Head of the Aviabase

Krasnoyarsk and now chief of *Avialesookhrana*, we conducted the first large international and interdisciplinary forest fire experiment near Bor, Krasnoyarsk Region. The conference and experiment gave to all of us new insights on the role and importance of forest fires in Russia and the global boreal zone.

This was also the time when *Avialesookhrana*, representing the Russian Federation, became an active member of the international community which started to work together to address forest fire problems worldwide. Eduard Pavlovich Davidenko was the first representative of the Russian Federation in the ECE/FAO Team of Specialists on Forest Fire. He also belongs to the United Nations Wildland Fire Advisory Group.

The Russian Federation in 1996 was host of an important international conference entitled "Forest, Fire and Global Change". Supported by *Avialesookhrana*, specialists from throughout the world met in Shushenkoe to discuss programmatic issues. The questions to be answered included this: "How can the international community work together more efficiently to address the expected changes in the world that may lead to more destructive fires?" The Shushenkoe conference was a great milestone for improving international cooperation in wildland fire management.

However, these years in the middle of the 1990s brought not only enthusiasm but also many changes to Russia and to the rest of the world. At the time when *Avialesookhrana* started to build up its own airfleet for forest protection, the country suffered an economic crisis which went along with all the problems arising from the transition of the former policies and administrations to new concepts of managing natural resources, including forestry.

Russia was not alone. Many other countries in Western and Eastern Europe transformed old systems of forestry to new ones (decentralization and reduction of forest administrations, privatisation, change of forest management). As a general trend both in the West and the East of Europe the role of the State (either central government or regional governments) was reduced, with all the negative consequences on forest management and the capabilities of efficient forest protection.

Avialesookhrana went through a very critical time. During my regular visits I observed this crisis which had a tremendous negative impact on the ability of *Avialesookhrana* to fulfil its duties. Nonetheless, the professionalism and enthusiasm of *Avialesookhrana*'s staff did not only keep your service alive – you were also able to expand your visions and capabilities to build up your own airfleet of helicopters and fixed wing aircraft for fire observation, transport and fire suppression

Observing the forest sector of the Russian Federation from outside I have the impression that there is a process of stabilization. During yesterday's briefing of the regional heads of the forest administrations the Chief of the Federal Forestry Agency, Mr. Valery P. Roshchupkin, indicated that the Agency and the Ministry of Natural Resources intend to strengthen the capabilities of forest fire protection. There is also a discussion of a new fire management strategy to be formally adopted by the government. A new strategy will look at both economy and ecology of fire protection – and this is what is really needed.

The international community is looking at Russia as a forest country which has a significant importance in the global system. The interest to protect Russia's forest resources from destructive fire is a global interest. This is why we are looking at Russia with solidarity and also friendship. We are also aware that the magnitude of the fire protection problem requires specific and probably unique solutions.

But back to crisis management. From my point of view I have observed that the personnel of *Avialesookhrana* was successful to manage the most difficult times of the economic crisis. The crisis is not yet over. Staff members and families have been severely affected by the economic problems. However, *Avialesookhrana* staff has managed the crisis by acting responsible and in solidarity.

Solidarity is also a term which I would like to use when conveying the greetings and congratulations of the Global Fire Monitoring Center and the United Nations Wildland Fire Advisory Group. I wish all of you a safe hand in meeting the challenges of the future. As I said before, Russia is a unique country concerning the importance of forests. Russian forest have a unique importance for the functioning and sustainability of the of ecosystem Earth. This is why the country also needs unique solutions in protecting these forest resources.

