

**Meeting of the Public Ecology Council, May 2014:  
Fires as the Light at the End of the Tunnel—Kuban Authorities Start Talking  
About the Fight Against Agricultural Burning**

Last week in Krasnodar there was a meeting of the regional Public Ecology Council, at which members of the public complained to the authorities about the catastrophic number of anthropogenic agricultural fires that have caused the loss of natural habitat and been the source of atmospheric pollution in rural areas.

**Why is the law not working?**

The Public Ecology Council meeting became a unique indicator that this past year a legal novelty came into force – a direct ban on any agricultural burning. We recall that in May of last year the NGOs Bellona and Ecology Watch in the Southern Caucasus approached the legislative authorities in Krasnodar Krai (see [http://www.bellona.ru/articles\\_ru/articles\\_2013/1377001644.34](http://www.bellona.ru/articles_ru/articles_2013/1377001644.34)) with a proposal to write into law a direct ban on burning dry agricultural residues outside of settled areas. (The previous version of the law, “On the Preservation of the Atmosphere in Krasnodar Krai” had envisioned a ban on burning dry stubble and trash only in settled areas.) They also proposed administrative responsibility for these actions. The ecological organizations based their work on the experience of Rostov Oblast, which has been more-or-less successful in counteracting the mass practice of burning straw and dry stubble, thanks to severe administrative sanctions.

By the end of June 2013 the amendments to the law of Krasnodar Krai had been adopted. However, only then was it understood that there would be little result from legislative novelties alone without organizational efforts by the local authorities, a system of constant monitoring and, most important, an active reaction to agricultural fires. To all appearances, this was well demonstrated this past year.

Last year, as if nothing had happened, wheat straw burned in the fields of Kuban, particularly in the northern and north-eastern regions of the krai, where kilometers of the forest belt were harmed (and cases were even noted of under-fires in the forest itself) and the shores of reservoirs burned by massive and widespread fires. The residents of Novopokrovskii and Beloglininskii Regions were forced to live under conditions of intolerably high levels of atmospheric pollution during the entire harvest.

These regions are classic “bear’s corners” –250 to 300 kilometers away from the krai center. The reason for the burning binge is precisely this—by the time the ecological inspector gets there from the city, the fire has already been extinguished. However, it is more often the case that information about the fire does not even get to the competent authorities.

## **A cluster of problems**

Departmental confusion, the inability of the fire brigades of the Ministry of Emergency Situations to extinguish fires outside of settled areas, the fire authority leadership's disinterest in pinpointing and researching these events, the utter impunity of the fire setters, the deliberate whitewashing by the farming sector, divorced from reality and "resolving" the problem of agricultural fires exclusively according to their own parameters and accounts – all these became the theme of the Public Ecological Council that was initiated by the Ecology Watch of the Southern Caucasus.

At the meeting were representatives from the krai administration (the ministries of natural resources and agriculture), Federal Service for the Supervision of Natural Resource Usage (Rosprirodnadzor), Ministry of Emergency Situations, the Non-commercial partnership "Southern Rice Union," and the Institute of Applied and Experimental Ecology of Kuban State Agricultural University. The group of representatives from the regional administration was led by Vice-Governor Vadim Lukoyanov.

Representatives from Ecology Watch and Bellona spoke about the problem of controlling agricultural fires as Russia-wide and engendered by the absence in federal legislation of any mechanism for the controlled burning of harvest residues—if this burning is objective and scientifically-based, for example, due to the presence of quarantinable pests or diseases in the stubble. In this legal vacuum, many fires are set because of short-term advantage and are seen by the agricultural producers as unavoidable.

The same motive—economics—drive agricultural producers when they are "clearing" dry brush from ravines, gullies and in-grown canals. It is without a doubt cheaper to toss in a match than get the tractor and mower, even though fire spreads through dry brush with enormous speed, destroying all life in its path, including insects and soil biota that are beneficial to plants.

The presenters noted that the protected natural habitats along the shores of the Azov Sea are particularly affected every year – the federal preserve "Priazovskii," the natural monument "Khanskoe Lake," and the Kuban Delta marsh that is protected by the Ramsar Convention (on the Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Wildlife Habitat).

The meeting also touched on the important regional problem of rice straw, which amounts to no less than 700-800 tons each year in Kuban. The rice harvest lasts until November because of the particular climate in Kuban, which means that growers have to harvest the grain as quickly as possible, leaving behind unchopped straw. It is not deemed feasible to handle it in any other way because of the complicated weather conditions so it is just burned at the convenient opportunity.

However, other rice-producing countries (Italy, for example) actively seek and find solutions for the "straw" problem. (For example, there are projects for the industrial transformation of straw into silicon dioxide, cellulose and other products). In Russia the horse has not yet left the barn, as we say.

The position of the Kuban rice growers was presented by Igor Lubach, President of the council of the non-commercial partnership "Southern Rice Union" and member of the Krasnodar Krai Legislative Assembly. According to him, no one thought about the question of what to do with the straw when the rice sector was developed in Kuban in Soviet times. He believes the solution must be comprehensive. On the one hand, we need to consider how to re-outfit farms with new technology and equip them with more powerful combines that are capable of harvesting the grain and properly chopping straw simultaneously; and on the other, seek a solution in the commercial use of rice straw, in part as cheap

fuel for boilers and small heating units (although here, as Lobach noted, the problem is that regional energy authorities do not want to accept electrical energy from small suppliers).

### **Economic stimuli for transgressors**

Representatives from the krai authorities agreed that the problem of agricultural fires has to be resolved as soon as possible. Vice-Governor Lukoyanov said that a framework for the legal burning of residues must be established on the condition that agricultural producers pay compensatory fees for polluting the atmosphere. For unsanctioned fires, Lukoyanov recommended establishing “hundredfold sanctions.” “Otherwise, growers will have no economic stimulus for stopping this perverse practice,” he noted.

The meeting of the Public Ecology Council resulted in a full resolution with a packet of recommendations to various departments, the main points of which can be summarized as:

- The region must have a unified structure, responsibility and monitoring of fires in open areas on the basis of GPS technology,
- The fire brigades must be better equipped with modern technology and must have mobile pedestrian fire-fighting units,
- A comprehensive regional program for state support of farmers who practice incorporating straw and stubble into the soil is required, and
- A comprehensive regional program to introduce economically effective techniques for using rice straw is essential.

(The full text of the recommendations will be published on the website of the [Krasnodar Krai Ministry of Natural Resources](#).)

*--Dmitry Shevchenko, Bellona, translated by Gail Stevenson, ICCI Russia Program Director*