

Firesetters Who Destroy Protected Forests In Krasnodar Escape Responsibility



Authorities in the Kuban have advertised a critical fire threat in protected areas. The fire threat situation is publicized each summer, although it has little impact on the actual fire situation—extraordinary measures are only put into effect after a large fire threatens the population. Moreover, the situation will hardly improve without an effective way to make those who cause fires responsible for their actions.

-----*Dmitri Shevchenko, August 22, 2014*

The Black Sea Coast is Again Ablaze

Last year in spite of unprecedented efforts by various organizations monitoring the fire situation in southern Russia, the authorities [could not save](#) the Abrauskii Wildlife Preserve near Novorossisk, close to the border of the Utrinskii Reserve, from major burning. The fire burned nearly 9 hectares, but the important thing is not the area, but the location where the elements raged—on the only well-preserved plot of typical mid-Black Sea flora and fauna in the Northern Black Sea Coast area. About 60 local species of plants and animals are listed in the Red Book of Russia and Krasnodar Krai.

When the fires were extinguished in the damaged relics of the forest, not only the charred stumps of juniper and pistachio trees were collected, but also Black Sea turtles burned alive in their shells, for example....

Those guilty of these man-made fires were not found – because they were not looked for. The police and firemen did not even bother to confirm the eyewitness accounts that the fire was started by fireworks that took place during the night of August 10-11 at a nearby resort.

This summer was another big resort season of emergency situations. On July 28 near Gelendzhik in the nature preserve “Dzhankhotskii Pitsunda Pine Forest” near the village of

Dzhankhot the pine needles on the forest floor burned. Hot dry weather and wind helped the fire to spread quickly. As "[Rossiiskaya Gazeta](#)" wrote, before the fire fighters arrived on the scene, the ground forest fire was able to take over 3.5 hectares, threatening Pitsunda pines listed in the Red Book of Russia.

Fortunately, there were no human casualties, although the fire edge moved close to the "Okean" resort. Almost 350 guests had to be immediately evacuated, but the firefighting lasted two days because the difficult terrain did not allow for the widespread use of fire trucks. The firefighters worked with manual equipment and only when it became clear that the fire could not be stopped was a Mi-8 water bombing helicopter brought in.

Cossacks and volunteers helped out—around 400 people were involved in all.

"The wind direction changed four times, as did the direction of the fire. The terrain conditions were as difficult as possible—a mountainous place, not very passable and inaccessible to heavy equipment. They mostly worked by hand, which, by and large, was effective," as the Deputy Governor of Krasnodar Krai, Vadim Lukoyanov, [boasted](#) to the media.

But again, the silence of the grave around investigation of the cause of the incident that diverted so much energy and resources and ruined the vacation of hundreds of tourists.

Everything is fine with monitoring. What more is needed?

The continuing fire Bacchanalia on the Black Sea Coast, where each summer tens of hectares of very valuable forest are burned (and not only accidentally but also on purpose) is surprising because the Kuban authorities are, however slowly, beginning to take measures to tighten control over fires.

In 2013 after urgent appeals by ecological organizations, [the Krasnodar Krai Legislature adopted amendments to the regional law](#), "On Preservation of the Atmosphere," and approved an outright ban on burning stubble and straw on agricultural lands and on burning dry growth on all other land. The regional Ministry of Agriculture has instituted a system of real-time satellite fire observation.

However, it appears this is not sufficient.

As the Oleg Solyonov, Deputy Minister of Natural Resources of Krasnodar Krai, explained to this Bellona correspondent, the problem is that burning agricultural residues and dry growth can only be directly confirmed by state inspectors by official observation.

"The legal practice is such that the imposition of administrative measures on the law-breaker can only happen on the basis of laboratory analysis at the time of the burn. A large agricultural area does not always allow for direct observation of the burn area," says Solyonov.

In his words, in 2012 the Krasnodar Krai Ministry of Natural Resources sent to the Krai legislature a proposal to give police the authority to generate protocols for administrative violations of the law on preservation of the atmosphere and fire safety. And there it remains.

Moreover, in the words of Solonov, the Krasnodar Krai Ministry of Natural Resources has been trying to get the Russian federal natural preservation agency to review a draft methodology for calculating damage to the atmosphere from the burning of crop residues. The draft was [developed in 2012](#) by the Kuban State University Research Institute for Applied and Experimental Ecology at the behest of the Krasnodar Krai administration.

According to the Krasnodar Krai Ministry of Natural Resources, two letters have already been sent to Rinat Gizatulin, Deputy Minister for Natural Resources, requesting consideration of requiring those responsible for agricultural and dry grass fires not only to pay the fines, but also to pay compensation for increased air pollution (including with soot). However, there has as yet been no reaction from federal authorities.

Unlike agricultural lands, forest lands (at least in theory) are subject to better fire monitoring as a separate Krasnodar Krai agency, the Krai Forest Fire Center, is responsible. According to this agency, 341 ground patrol routes have been worked out, but there is one nuance – those who lease land from the state forest fund are responsible for it but, in fact, no one is responsible for agricultural or village holdings.

The fire at “Dzhankhotskii Forest” happened precisely on forest land that had been rented for tourist use and the renter apparently thought that, at the end of the day, somebody or other should be responsible for fighting the fire. Because of the influx of disorganized tourists, fires at “Dzhankhotskii Forest” happen every year. There have even been cases of intentional fire setting in this forest—people who deliberately want to destroy the Red Book trees so that they can try later to build on the parcel. At this time there is not one known case where the renter of the burned land was punished in any way.

In an irony of fate, the proverbial “patriarchal dacha” –the summer residence of the highest leadership of the Russian Orthodox church – is a neighbor to “Dzhankhotskii Forest.” And if the authorities are not capable of ensuring a safe vacation for such august vacationers, what is there to say about ordinary tourists.

Obviously, it is senseless to speak only about perfecting the system of fire monitoring. There must be a system for the control of those who use the land that allows not only for mandatory fines, but also mandates compensation not only for damage to the surrounding ecology, but also to the public sector budget, which pays for the fire fighting operations.

---Translated by Gail Stevenson, ICCI Russia Program Director
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