

'Living' Resources to Get Consolidated Ministry

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Environmentalists have cautiously welcomed plans to create a new ministry to run the country's fisheries, forestry and hunting sectors, but warned another round of reform in the sector could further erode rather than improve governance.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev ordered Arkady Dvorkovich at the end of December to draw up plans for the new ministry in response to a decline in the national fish catch, Kommersant reported.

According to the report, the government is considering either upgrading the Federal Fisheries Agency — made a part of the Agriculture Ministry last May — into its own ministry, or creating an entirely new body encompassing not only fisheries, but also forestry and hunting.

The new "Renewable Natural Resources Ministry" would assume responsibility for three key "living" resource sectors: fisheries, forestry and hunting. The latter two are both currently

regulated by the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry.

Environmentalists said the latter idea was in principle a good one, but warned that near-constant reforms in the past several years have seriously impacted all three sectors.

"We have long said that the idea of uniting all of the so-called living resources under a single structure makes sense," said Vladimir Krever, director of WWF Russia's biodiversity program. "But just making a ministry is not enough, without the right structures and qualified personnel in place to make it effective."

It is unclear who might head the new ministry if it comes into being. The reform would leave Natural Resources and Environment Minister Nikolai Fedorov largely responsible for extractive industries like hydrocarbons and mining.

A drop in the catch and the production of fish products apparently prompted the proposed restructuring.

No figures are available for the catch in 2012, but the most recent figures from the State Statistics Service show that fish production fell from 1,325,000 tons in 2009 to 1,264,000 tons in 2010, while the catch of shellfish, crabs and other crustaceans and mollusks fell from 44,800 to 39,500 tons in the same period.

Critics have suggested that the decline is symptomatic of chronic reorganization of the sector rather than simply last May's reshuffle.

The Fisheries Agency has undergone 15 reforms, including transfers between different ministries and being designated variously an "agency" and a "committee" since it was created in 2004, according to RIA-Novosti.

Similar meddling in the Federal Forestry Service over the past decade has seriously eroded national forest management, experts in the sector said Wednesday.

The previously monolithic forestry sector was divided up in the 1990s, with forests and forest management remaining under state control but the actual business of logging and exploitation largely privatized.

In 2000, the formerly independent Federal Forestry Service was put under the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry. Under a 2006 reform, many of its responsibilities were handed over to regional authorities as part of a wider program of decentralization.

In 2008, it was transferred to the Agriculture Ministry, but following disastrous wild fires in 2010, it was again made directly answerable to the government. Then in May 2012, in a fit of post-election house cleaning, it was again transferred to the Natural Resources Ministry.

This near constant game of hot potato, and especially the 2006 reforms, almost certainly contributed to the disaster that engulfed the nation in the summer of 2010, said Yelena Kulikova, director of WWF Russia's forest program.

"Any reform is disruptive. The Natural Resources Ministry, for example, mostly deals with non-renewable resources that are of the most significance to the economy, so inevitably

forestry gets less attention there," she said.

That makes the idea of a ministry specifically for renewable resources — fisheries, forests and wild fauna — a worthy idea in principle, she said. "If run properly, forests [and other resources] could be an inexhaustible resource for the economy, as well as providing bio-system services," she said. "On the other hand, yet another restructuring could simply weaken regulation even further."

Calls to the Federal Fisheries Agency and the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry went unanswered Wednesday.

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