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Illegal Logging Battle Puts Forests in the Red

By Lena Smirnova

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Tatyana Dolgoshyolova surveys an illegal logging site by Konyovo village. **Lena Smirnova**

ARKHANGELSK REGION —Tatyana Dolgoshyolova stands in a forest clearing. She is surrounded by felled trees and stumps on which red paint is used to mark the 64 cubic meters of pine that was illegally cut down and whisked away to lumber mills.

Dolgoshyolova, a senior consultant at the Arkhangelsk region's forestry inspection office, is angry because the loggers who cut down these trees — and many like them — still haven't been caught or punished.

"Criminal cases are being [prematurely] closed. All this goes unpunished," she said.

Inspectors in Arkhangelsk region carried out 6,103 raids last year and identified 359 cases of illegal logging, the losses of which add up to 410.5 million rubles ($12 million). And the northern region is not the worst hit by this destructive practice. Primorye and Leningrad

regions are notorious for the extensive criminal logging activity that takes place there.

Losses from illegal logging across the country cost hundreds of million rubles every year. There are official statistics, but hardly anyone believes them, including authorities. Despite the scale of the problem, a lack of human resources and legal loopholes make catching and punishing offenders difficult.

Mikhail Kichakov, a forest inspector in the Plesetsk district of Arkhangelsk region, was the first to find the 64 cubic meter clearing in the spring when the snow melted and exposed the stumps and the abandoned felled trees the loggers had to clear to get to the bigger prizes.

He said he believed the criminals came to this site in the winter, quickly cutting down 20 of the largest trees that were closest to the road. Now their stumps are marked with red paint to indicate to inspectors that the damage has been tallied.

To make matters worse, the illegal loggers are in cahoots with the local population, which has its own defense network against the inspectors. For example, residents of the Konyovo village who have close ties to the loggers know the inspectors' car well and as soon as it passes a particular point on the local road, they phone to warn the loggers. By the time inspectors arrive at a site, it is deserted.

Though practical bribes — such as cases of vodka — are sometimes offered to inspectors, intimidation is the preferred method used to keep them out of the way. Dolgoshyolova said one inspector's car was set on fire while another was beaten in the entrance to his apartment building.

To reduce interference, some illegal tree cutting is done at night. A nightly logging session can yield around 100,000 rubles worth of timber, Dolgoshyolova said. The value would be higher, but illegal timber sells at half the market price because of the associated risks to buyers, though this only acts as a stimulus for more illegal cutting.

Even when the illegal loggers are caught, they are rarely punished. The Arkhangelsk region inspectors gave police the documentation to open 169 criminal cases, but only six cases were actually brought to prosecution as a result.

Dolgoshyolova said the police were reluctant to open cases not because they were bribed but because proving guilt is difficult. It is hard to tell a legal logging site from an illegal one and the police lack the specialized knowledge to understand the difference.

In terms of the logging volumes, "black loggers," as the illegal operators are termed, are not the main problem. Local ecologists said the biggest offenders were logging companies who legitimately leased land plots and then cut trees outside their boundaries.

In one such case, Dolgoshyolova visited a logging site near Kargopol and found that the owner's books did not track all of the 4,000 cubic meters of timber that she saw lying on the ground. She proceeded to recalculate the numbers with her coworkers, crawling on the ground and manually counting individual tree stumps.

She then spent the rest of the afternoon with the owner, trying to get him to sign a report about his illegal activity.

“We sat there for four hours,” Dolgoshyolova said. “He flat-out refused to sign it. I’m a government worker so I can’t say bad words to him. He just sat there and quietly, calmly wore me out.”

The owner eventually signed the report, but the judges deemed his violations of the law “insignificant” and let him go. He is still operating, though under more scrutiny.

“He is alive and well,” Dolgoshyolova said wryly. “We love him a lot.”

Fair Warning

By law, forest inspectors as well as police officers can only come to the legal logging sites with prior warning or accompanied by staff from the prosecutor’s office. Monitoring forests has become even harder to carry out with the introduction of the new Forest Code in 2006, which led to 700 of the region’s forestry staff being dismissed as the federal government shifted more responsibility for forest care to regional administrations and the forest lessees themselves.

Kichakov is one of three people monitoring a territory spanning 104 hectares.

The Federal Forestry Agency helps by sending satellite images of forests that inspectors can use to locate where illegal logging has taken place.

But Dolgoshyolova said that the images are not as helpful as they could be because they are sent to the inspectors at the end of October, rather than in the spring before they begin making their summer rounds. As a result, inspectors have to repeat some of the routes in the fall if the satellite images hint at any misdoing.

Another problem with these images is that there are few experts who can decipher them, said Tatyana Yanitskaya, deputy director at the Russian branch of the Forest Stewardship Council, or FSC. Logging companies also use different excuses to escape responsibility for cutting trees outside their allotted plots, she added. For example, company heads can claim that another party cut the trees before they leased the land or that they cut down the extra trees unintentionally.

The FSC issues certificates to logging firms and manufacturers who use their products if they promote responsible forestry practices. Since the first voluntary certificate was given out in Russia in 2000, its green tree logo has become obligatory for companies who are exporting to ecologically conscious markets.

Arkhangelsk is now the leading region in the country for hosting FSC certified companies and ecologists said they hoped that the system would help to curb illegal logging here and elsewhere.

“The conservation of valuable forest territories is no longer just demanded by ecologists. It has also become a sort of economic factor,” said Andrei Shchyogolev, head of the World Wildlife Fund office in Arkhangelsk region. “If the company does not comply with FSC requirements, it will lose its sales market and, eventually, the region as a whole.”

Contact the author at e.smirnova@imedia.ru

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