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The Russia, Europe, and Near Asia program works on a number of projects in many countries throughout the region. The following articles show highlights of our work over the past six months.

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Former Chief of the USFS Dale Bosworth plants trees with Ukrainian youth on Earth Day.

FORMER CHIEF OF THE US FOREST SERVICE TRAVELS TO UKRAINE, ARMENIA, AND GEORGIA

Dale Bosworth, Former Chief of the US Forest Service from 2001-2007, and Val Mezainis, Director of US Forest Service International Programs, traveled to Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia in late April and early May 2013. The delegation met with US government agencies, foreign government officials, NGOs, and donor organizations in each country in order to learn about current issues in natural resource management and to discuss opportunities to expand on existing cooperation.

Following a quick trip to Crimea to observe US Forest Service activity in the area, the delegation celebrated Earth Day in Kyiv, Ukraine. With the generous assistance of the US Embassy in Kyiv, the National University of Life and Environmental Sciences (NULES), and the State Agency on Forest Resources of Ukraine (SAFRU), the delegation participated in a number of events including meetings with officials, presentations to university students, and press conferences. Chief Bosworth participated in public events with John Tefft, US Ambassador to Ukraine; Viktor Sivets, Head of SAFRU; and Dmytro Melnychuk, Rector of NULES. As part of an afternoon event sponsored by SAFRU, Chief Bosworth planted trees with school children from a nearby



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community. During their stay in Ukraine, the delegation discussed USFS cooperation in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone with the State Agency on Exclusion Zone Management and future opportunities for cooperation.

In Georgia, the delegation's visit was especially timely as many of the natural resource management agencies (including the Forestry Agency) and policies are undergoing a period of re-organization, and technical assistance from USFS is of particular interest at this time. The delegation attended a meeting where a new draft forest policy was discussed, met with the Ministry of Environmental Protection to discuss their plans for forestry and water management, and explored the topic of grazing management with the Ministry of Agriculture. The delegation also met with various donor organizations, attended a panel discussion of environmental NGOs, and had a field visit to the forest and burnt area around Borjomi National Park.

In Armenia, the delegation had the opportunity to observe work being done by NGOs and government agencies. The group visited a nursery which provides tree seedlings for community green spaces, toured a wildlife reserve created on land being rented by an NGO to provide a buffer zone to an adjacent protected area, and had the opportunity to see some of the forest being managed by Hyantar (Armenia's Forest Agency) and hear about how their work is structured. The delegation also met with a panel of NGOs to hear their perspective and learn about their work. They also had the opportunity to learn about mining development in Armenia and discuss opportunities for US Forest Service to share lessons learned through experiences with mining on agency-owned lands in the US. Overall, the trip has resulted in a number of new contacts and ideas for future cooperation.

CZECH DELEGATION VISITS DEPUTY CHIEF MARY WAGNER AND TRAVELS TO GIFFORD PINCHOT NATIONAL FOREST

The Czech ambassador to the United States and the deputy head of the Czech Ministry of the Environment led an eight-member delegation from the Czech Republic in official visits with natural resource agencies in the United States in late June. In Washington DC, the delegation met with Mary Wagner, Deputy Chief of the US Forest Service, and discussed challenges associated with managing a national entity and ways in which the agency collaborates with local offices to manage forests and grasslands in the US. The delegation then traveled to Washington State to visit the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. The Deputy Forest Supervisor and other members of the excellent staff of the Gifford Pinchot NF discussed comparable efforts and challenges related to the management of forests in the US and the Czech Republic, including bark beetle which has been extremely problematic in both countries.

EASTERN EUROPE FIRE AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE TRAINING

In partnership with the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) and the US Embassy in Hungary, the US Forest Service recently conducted a week-long workshop for emergency response and forest service personnel from eight countries of Eastern Europe. In addition to forty Hungarian participants, twenty experts from seven other countries traveled to Lake Balaton, Hungary, from Serbia, Romania, Croatia, Slovakia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria and Slovenia.



A Delegation from the Ministry of Environment of the Czech Republic eagerly pose with Smokey Bear and the enthusiastic staff of Gifford Pinchot National Forest.



Fire fighters from eight Eastern European countries came together to learn how to transfer structural fire fighting skills to combating wildfire, which is an increasing threat in their region.

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US Forest Service experts worked alongside IAFC trainers to teach the participants, who were mostly structural fire fighters, how to transfer their skills to better combat the growing frequency and intensity of wildland fires in the region. In addition to fire-fighting tactics, the trainers facilitated discussions about the various command structures in each country, the opportunities for and challenges of working together across borders, and the unified system approach used in the United States known as the Incident Command System.

“The one-week training on the Prevention and Management of Wildland Fire has commenced with great success,” wrote Zoltan Illes, Minister of the Environment for Hungary, in a letter addressed to Ms. Eleni Kounalakis, US Ambassador to Hungary. “I believe that the international nature of the course was very important to share experiences and I am deeply convinced that with international cooperation we can prevent and manage these unfortunate phenomena.” When asked about the most valuable lessons of the week, participants resoundingly affirmed that working toward the creation of more unified systems of command, within each and among all countries of the region, is an important step to tackling the challenges of wildland fire and other disasters.

US-RUSSIA COOPERATION ON WILDFIRE MANAGEMENT

In recent years, wildfires have increased in number and severity in both Russia and the US, with significant impacts on life, property, and the environment. Climate change is likely to continue to exacerbate the wildfire situation. To address the shared challenges posed by wildfire, the U.S. Forest Service and the Russian Federal Forestry Agency’s



Above: United States Forest Service Representatives with Pilot Observers and Hosts, Avialesookhrana Training Center, Pushkino, Russia.

Right: USFS personnel observe a fire fighter training of the Russian Aerial Forest Fire Center in Yoshkar Ala, Russia.



Community-based fire management in the Altai Region has involved outreach to farmers who often burn fields. Agricultural burning is a major contributor to arctic black carbon. The two farmers pictured here received information on the impacts of burning from USFS NGO partners.



Aerial Forest Fire Center (Avialesookhrana) have a long-standing cooperative relationship to share experiences, techniques, and strategies for managing wildfire and preventing human-caused wildfire. In March 2013, two USFS fire specialists visited to Russia to participate in training programs organized by Avialesookhrana. The visit included presentations and interaction with 33 pilot observers in the city of Pushkino, Russia. Following the participation in the pilot observer training, USFS specialists visited Yoshkar Ola, Russia and participated in training for over 100 smokejumpers and rapellers at Volga State University of Technology. During the visit, USFS discussed a range of issues related to wildfire management, including the use of aviation resources, general fire suppression and prevention, the role and work of handcrews, and the Incident Command System (ICS) used to respond to wildfire incidents. These exchanges are mutually beneficial for U.S. and Russia fire managers as they discuss new challenges and innovations for managing wildfires.

COMMUNITY-BASED FIRE MANAGEMENT IN RUSSIA

Since 2010, the US Forest Service and Pacific Environment (an NGO based in California) have been supporting community-based fire management pilot programs throughout Russia. These efforts are supported in part by the U.S. State Department Arctic Black Carbon Initiative and have been designed to address open burning sources of black carbon, including agricultural burning and human-caused wildfires. These pilot programs are being implemented by international and local Russian NGOs, often in cooperation with local government partners and volunteers. These programs involve a mix of strategies and approaches to address human-caused fires and agricultural burning, including the development of educational resources, community fire wardens or monitors, and the establishment of mobile fire brigades. In July 2013, after over 2 years of project implementation, the US Forest Service and Pacific Environment convened partners for a workshop to discuss lessons-learned and explore options for sustaining

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This mobile fire brigade was created by NGO partners in southwest Primorsky Krai to respond quickly and efficiently to human-caused fires.

and expanding these community-based efforts in Russia. The workshop, which was held in St. Petersburg, Russia, consisted of participation from six local NGO partners. Participants discussed methods in each of their respective pilot areas, challenges in project implementation, and successes that have resulted from their work. These local-level efforts and experiences are valuable for finding new ways to address human-caused fires in Russia.

USFS TRAIL SPECIALIST ADVISES ON HIKING TRAIL DESIGN AT LAKE BAIKAL, RUSSIA

Lake Baikal is the world's largest, deepest, and oldest lake. It is 1,643m deep and contains one fifth of the entire world's fresh water. The unique ecosystem sustains 2,500 indigenous species and sub-species. However, this rich biodiversity is under threat due to resource exploitation and increased anthropogenic impacts from tourism and other shoreline developments. In general, tourism and outdoor recreation are rapidly growing industries in the Baikal region. Although tourist companies and land managers want to attract more foreign tourists and organized groups, the most significant recent growth in visitation has been from domestic tourists. The increase in tourism—especially unorganized or “wild” tourism—is beginning to have significant impacts on the fragile ecosystems of the region.



USFS Trails Expert works with a volunteer from the Great Baikal Trail to measure the incline on a section of trail in the Barguzinski Nature Preserve.



USFS Trail Expert Brian Poturalski (foreground) explains trail maintenance measures to remedy steep outslopes that can be dangerous to hikers. Members of the Great Baikal Trail and the Barguzinski Nature Reserve will employ Brian's recommendations to improve this trail near Lake Baikal.

In early June, a team comprised of staff members from the Barguzinski Nature Reserve (northwest shore of Lake Baikal), volunteers of the regional NGO Great Baikal Trail, and a trails expert from the US Forest Service worked together to evaluate trail conditions and recreational opportunities in a section of the Reserve. The project objective was to scout the Shumilikha River Trail and assess the trail's current condition and make recommendations to improve the user experience on the trail and develop mitigation measures to minimize impacts from hikers on the sensitive ecosystem. In addition, the trail was evaluated for interpretive opportunities with a focus on “Light on the Land” ethics and proper trail etiquette. Led by the USFS trails expert, the team provided recommendations for the Reserve's land managers and GBT's coordinators, which will guide planning and implementing trail projects on the Shumilikha River Trail in future years.

PROMOTING COMMUNITY NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS IN MONGOLIA

In order to address the need for sustainable grazing in Mongolia, the Millennium Challenge Corporation has been working with herders since 2008 to pilot a legal and organizational framework for community-based management of grazing areas. The project, known as the Peri-Urban Rangeland Project because it focused on areas near the capital and some of Mongolia's other larger cities, helped herder households and local governments set up lease arrangements for grazing lands to encourage herders to manage the lands more effectively and reduce herd sizes with fewer, more productive livestock. In Mongolia's northern districts the taiga grades into steppe, and herders in

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USFS Regional Ecologist Tom DeMeo (left) takes notes as local herders and municipal environmental officers explain a grazing management plan for a community herder group.

these areas use forests for wood, medicinal and food plants, and supplemental grazing.

In April and May of 2013, a team of USFS technical experts traveled to Mongolia to work with MCC and their local counterparts to form recommendations about how to promote the long-term viability of the Herder Group structure that MCC has been piloting for the last several years. The team, which included a Forest Ecologist and a Social Geographer, held interviews with herder household members to learn more about the community-based natural resource management structure and to hear about the different ways that herder families use forest resources, and how this might factor into their ability to managing grazing resources in a sustainable way (for example, are these herder families supplementing their food stores through collection of berries or mushrooms?) The team also participated in a workshop about Sustainable Community-Based Forest Management, which was co-sponsored by MCC and the Mongolian Ministry of Environment and Green Development's Division of Forestry. The trip allowed the USFS team to make valuable connections with a variety of stakeholders in Mongolia's natural resource management sector and to generate ideas for topics and of future collaboration between the two countries.



ABOUT THE USFS INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS

International Programs of the USFS, Department of Agriculture, promotes sustainable forest management and biodiversity conservation internationally. By linking the skills of the field-based staff of the USFS with partners overseas, the Agency can address the most critical forestry issues and concerns. International Programs regularly taps into the agency's wide range of expertise. Wildlife biologists, forest economists, hydrologists, disaster and fire management specialists, and policy makers are among those who comprise the staff of over thirty thousand employees.

Since international cooperation is necessary to sustain the ecological and commercial viability of global forest resources and to conserve biodiversity, most of our work is done in collaboration with other organizations.

The United States benefits from our work overseas. Innovative technologies are brought back to the country, cross boundary environmental problems are addressed, and opportunities to hone USFS skills are increased. Lastly, strengthened international ties lead to mutual aid, as illustrated by assistance from Mexico, Canada, Australia and Israel who assisted with the devastating 2000 fire season in the western region of the United States.

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