
Interview of the Chairman of the Investigative Committee of Russia Alexander Bastrykin to Rossiyskaya Gazeta



Forest brothers

Alexander Bastrykin: Criminals and corrupt officials are liable under the law

Recently, the Verkhnepyshminsky City Court sentenced men for illegal logging of trees in the local forestry. They received suspended sentences and heavy fines. These news stayed practically unnoticed since it was so trivial. There are a lot of such sentences.

Russia is the largest forest state in the world, and forest resources have a serious impact on the economy of almost half of the country's regions. This is on the one hand, and on the other, from year to year the crime that "lives thanks to the forest" inflicts enormous damage on the state. Illegal logging alone causes billions of dollars of damage to the Russian forest fund. And here nothing

would have happened without the "help" of regional officials. And this urgently requires tight control of the situation by law enforcement agencies.

The Chairman of the Investigative Committee of Russia told the RG readers about the current situation with forests from the Committee point of view.

Alexander Ivanovich, how can you explain the concern of law enforcement agencies about the current situation around the forest fund?

Alexander Bastrykin: Our activities are primarily aimed at protecting the rights of citizens, at preserving the health, protective, sanitary and hygienic functions of the forest fund, it is directly related to ensuring the right to a favorable environment and is one of the main goals of state policy. And the Investigative Committee as a state agency is empowered to investigate all possible cases of abuse in this area, and to bring the perpetrators to legal responsibility.

Would you clarify for our readers, what violations, or, as your employees put it, illegal acts, are committed in the forestry sector?

Alexander Bastrykin: These are mainly criminal activities related to illegal seizure of natural resources. These are such elements of crime as "illegal hunting", "illegal logging of forest plantations", "destruction or damage of forest plantations." Among this, the forest poaching takes the first place. But in general, in the overall structure of environmental crime, a large proportion is occupied by crimes related to illegal logging of forest plantations.

These corpus delicti fall within the competence of the internal affairs bodies; nevertheless, the Investigative Committee investigates criminal cases against officials of various levels who commit such unlawful acts. Their actions, along with the above-mentioned crimes, are often classified under other articles of the Criminal Code of Russia, including as official and corruption crimes.

Can we talk about the systematic nature of the work of the Investigative Committee of Russia in this field?

Alexander Bastrykin: Of course, we carry out this work in close cooperation with the operational units of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, the prosecutor's office and regulatory authorities. The analysis of the practice of prevention, detection and investigation of crimes related to violation of forest management rules is carried out on a systematic basis. The problems that arise are discussed at operational and coordination meetings to develop additional prevention mechanisms, methodologies for identifying and eliminating the sources, causes and conditions that contribute to the commission of crimes are developed. For example, representatives of the St. Petersburg Main Investigative Department of the Investigative Committee of Russia take part in a meeting of the specialized commission of the City Legislative Assembly for the environmental protection of the population, where topical issues of criminal prosecution are discussed.

I want to emphasize that only as a result of the joint work of investigative and tax authorities, operational units of the internal affairs bodies, customs and environmental authorities are we able to identify and suppress economic crimes related to deforestation, since often entrepreneurs receive income from deforestation through the so-called "gray" schemes, bypassing the statutory budgetary payments.

Moreover, such persons are pursuing the goal not only to evade paying taxes, but also to receive money from the treasury in the form of illegally refunded VAT. The use of such machinations is particularly widespread in forest regions, where business entities actively export timber.

Thus, in the Irkutsk region, the investigative bodies of the Investigative Committee suppressed tax evasion, illegal VAT refunds and fraud with causing damage to the country's budget in the amount of over 220 million rubles, by a large logger and timber exporter, BaikalLes LLC. These crimes were identified during the work of an interdepartmental working group specially created in the Irkutsk region on the initiative of the regional department of the Investigative Committee of Russia to identify tax crimes in the forestry complex.

Could you give an assessment of how successful the Investigative Committee of Russia is in opposing such "forest" crime?

Alexander Bastrykin: Concrete numbers speak for us. Thus, in 2019 the Investigative Committee of Russia reviewed 713 reports on crimes in this field, and 311 more in the first half of this year. Last year investigators of the Investigative Committee of Russia launched 371 probes, in 2020 - 189. As a result of the investigation, 167 criminal cases against 209 accused were sent to the courts last year, and during 6 months of this year their number amounted to 74 cases involving 119 accused. For example, in the Khabarovsk Territory, officials of the Sredne-Agmunsky district forestry have been prosecuted. They were charged with abuse of office and extortion of a bribe from a representative of a legal entity for general patronage.

In which regions the situation is the most alarming?

Alexander Bastrykin: 51 criminal cases are investigated in the Kirov Region, 11 are investigated in Karachay-Cherkessk Republic, 10 - in Irkutsk Region and 9 in Karelia. There are also criminal cases in the proceedings of the transport investigations departments: - 24 are investigated by the West Siberian, and 7 more - by the East Siberian Transport Investigations Department.

In particular, in the Kirov region, the defendants in the criminal case are the former deputy head of the region, Andrei Plitko, the minister of forestry of the region, Alexei Shurgin, and a number of other officials. According to the investigation, Plitko created an organized criminal group that specialized in taking bribes from individual entrepreneurs and legal entities operating in the forestry industry. In exchange for illegal remuneration, entrepreneurs received the right to conclude contracts with one of the state-owned enterprises for the purchase and sale of timber. Another example from

the Irkutsk region - the former Minister of Forestry of the region Sergei Sheverda was involved in illegal clear-cut sanitary felling in the state reserve "Tukolon", as a result of which the state suffered damage in the amount of more than 880 million rubles. At present the probe is being considered by court.

You are talking about the cases under investigation, but are there any with already imposed sentences?

Alexander Bastrykin: Such examples also exist. Former first deputy chairman of the government of the Khabarovsk Territory Vasily Shikhalev was found guilty of abuse of office and sentenced to 4 years in prison. The convict assisted entrepreneurs in obtaining benefits and subsidies worth more than 1 billion rubles.

Former director of the forestry department of the Primorsky Territory, Vladimir Ivanov, was also sentenced to 4 years in prison after receiving a bribe in the amount of 550 thousand dollars for the extension of lease agreements for forest plots.

From the point of view of the country's chief investigator, is it more often that one person is behind such schemes or is it criminal groups?

Alexander Bastrykin: Illegal deforestation is also carried out by organized groups with modern equipment and communication means. And the activities of a number of such groups was suppressed by joint efforts of law enforcement agencies.

For example, according to the materials of the criminal case, which is now being investigated in St. Petersburg, such an organized group included the deputy director and two former general directors of the Lenobles Leningrad Regional State Institution, the deputy heads of the Interregional Territorial Administration of the Federal Property Management Agency of St. Petersburg and the Leningrad Region, representatives the committee for the sale of the seized property of the region and a number of other persons. They committed systematic theft of timber from logging sites, export of timber and its sale under false documents.

In the Perm Territory, a criminal case into an organized criminal group that carried out illegal logging of forest plantations in the operational forests of the Sivinsky district forestry was investigated and sent to court.

It has long been no secret that foreign citizens are showing a very great interest in Russian resources in Siberia and the Far East. They are doing "forest" business. But do they always do it legally?

Alexander Bastrykin: In the Far East, a criminal case has been investigated into members of a transnational criminal community, consisting of citizens of Russia and China. By providing the

customs authorities with inaccurate information about the goods, the accomplices illegally moved over 23 thousand cubic meters of timber across the customs border of the Customs Union within the framework of the EurAsEC from Russia to the PRC. The goods were declared by "one-day" firms. The damage inflicted to state by the illegal actions amounted to over 455 million rubles.

In addition, the investigation of a criminal case against seven members of the criminal community, which was created in Khabarovsk 4 years ago, continues. They are accused of illegal movement of valuable timber species - Mongolian oak and Manchurian ash - to China on a large scale. The criminal community has committed at least 14 particularly grave crimes related to the smuggling of timber with a total volume of at least 25 thousand cubic meters and a cost of about 250 million rubles. Their criminal activity, infringing on the economic interests of Russia, was suppressed together with the employees of the FSB of Russia.

The active conduct of investigative actions aimed at exposing all members of the criminal community and bringing them to justice, as well as establishing additional episodes of their criminal activity currently continues.

In your opinion, is there anything that can be done at the legislative level to change the situation with the current alarming picture?

Alexander Bastrykin: The Investigative Committee conducts a thorough analysis of the practice of investigating criminal cases of crimes in the field of forestry and the identified causes and conditions that contributed to such crimes. It was proposed to empower Rosleskhoz with the powers of state protection of forest areas, to carry out an inventory and cadastral registration of forest lands, to regulate the procedure for drawing up technological maps of forest felling, to form a unified federal register of enterprises engaged in the extraction, processing and export of timber.

Currently, the government of the Russian Federation is negotiating draft laws that entrust Rosleskhoz with the authority to supervise compliance with the requirements of forestry legislation, as well as strengthen control over timber turnover. The state inventory of forests is being completed, an algorithm for drawing up technological maps is being worked out with the provision of their approval in the authorized bodies of state power.

The purpose of all these organizational measures is to establish a transparent system of control over the sales and processing of timber.

We must not forget that an effective solution to these problems will help improve our ecology and preserve the health of citizens.

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communication means

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Among the registered crimes in the field of ecology, illegal logging of forest stands - forest poaching
- takes the first place

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