

WWF-Russia and Greenpeace Russia Position Paper: Spawning Protection Forest River Belts and Their Importance for the Conservation of Valuable Fish Species

In the International Year of Salmon 2019, we draw attention to the importance of spawning protection forest river belts (further referred as “spawning forest zones”) for the conservation of valuable fish species and the threat to these forests.

The spawning forest zones is a special category of forests created in 1958 to preserve the coastal zones of water bodies, where the most valuable species of fish, i.e. salmon, sturgeon, and others spawn. These forests protect spawning rivers from adverse effects of industrial logging: soil ablation into the water, excessive spring floods and reduction of the water in summer, and silting spawning grounds. Only thanks to these forests, many important spawning rivers are still preserved, as well as significant areas of biologically valuable forests along them, and many lands that are important for Indigenous communities often located along the rivers. In areas where the rest of the forests were mostly cut down, spawning forest zones have become important repositories of biodiversity, and sometimes even the last remaining areas of pristine forests.

A significant part of the spawning forest zones is represented by intact forests that have never been exposed to intensive logging. In many regions, it is almost the only large category of forests that protects the remains of wildlife outside protected areas. Spawning forest zones, especially in the taiga forests, is a critical element of the environmental framework that supports the biological diversity and resilience of natural areas in general. Therefore, the role of these forests is not only to preserve valuable fish species, but in general to maintain a favorable environment in our country.

To date, most of the spawning forest zones adjacent to water bodies have a width of about 1 km. Their total area is 56.8 million hectares, i.e. 20.4% of the area of protected forests or 4.9% of the forest area of Russia. Part of this area should fall on much narrower water protection zones, but, firstly, narrow (50-200 m) water protection zones are not enough to protect the spawning grounds from the adverse effects of industrial logging, and secondly, unlike spawning forest zones, water protection ones in most cases are not properly allocated and are not taken into account.

In spawning forest zones clear cutting is prohibited, as well as construction (with some exceptions). At the same time, spawning forest zones continue to suffer from both selective logging and clear cuts carried out under the guise of pest and forest disease control, and the volume of these cuttings is constantly increasing. Therefore, the President of the Russian Federation issued an instruction based on WWF-Russia's appeal, which calls for a complete ban on industrial logging and the lease of forests for the purpose of logging in spawning forest zones and some other categories of forests.

Unfortunately, Federal Law No. 538-FZ of 27 December 2018 "On Amendments to the Forest Code of the Russian Federation and Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation to

Improve Legal Regulation of Acts on Conservation of Forests on Lands of the Forest Fund and Lands of other Categories" adopted in pursuance of this instruction, which will enter into force on 1st of July 2019, directly contradicts it. The law does not restrict logging in spawning forest zones, but also creates legal opportunities and prerequisites for a significant reduction in their total area of up to 10 times.

The main problematic part of this law is the new criteria for the assigning of forest areas to the category of spawning forest zones. Under this law the width of such spawning forest zones is reduced from 1 km on each bank of the river to 50-200 m. This is a critical reduction, which cannot be compensated by a new category of protected areas, fish protection zones. Fish protection zones have been officially approved so far only for six regions of the country, i.e. for the Republic of Adygea, the Republic of Altai, Altai, Amur, Astrakhan and Arkhangelsk Regions. However, even if they appear in all regions of Russia, with the existing spawning forest zones, in most cases they will coincide with much narrower water protection zones, which, as noted above, cannot save the spawning grounds of valuable fish species from the effects of industrial logging.

We believe that, given the lack of available timber resources in many regions of the country, the spawning forest zones in some regions will be logged in the near future. First, it threatens Arkhangelsk, Kirov, Irkutsk, Krasnoyarsk Regions, and the Komi Republic and the subjects of the Far Eastern Federal district, where forests outside the spawning forest zones are most depleted by logging.

This will not only cause irreparable damage to forest ecosystems, but will also lead to deterioration of water quality and populations of Pacific salmon, Atlantic salmon, sturgeon, whitefish and other most valuable fish species. Thus, the new law is a direct threat to the food security of the country and the preservation of aquatic biological resources in general. Moreover, the consequences of the adoption of the law may directly affect the interests of millions of Russians engaged in recreational fishing, as the degradation of rivers will have a negative impact on the number of not only particularly valuable species of fish, but also on many others. There will be even less fish in rivers and lakes.

We note that any research that enables to clearly determine the width of spawning forest zones necessary for the effective conservation of water bodies and spawning grounds has not yet been carried out. Numerous appeals to the deputies of the State Duma of the Russian Federation and to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment of Russia to discuss the draft bill with scientists, public organizations and the Public Council at the Federal Agency for Fisheries were ignored. Appeals of environmental organizations to the President of the Russian Federation and the Federation Council with a request to reject the law adopted in the third reading and to send it back for revision were not satisfied either.

In this regard, we propose to take urgent measures that will reduce the negative environmental and socio-economic consequences of the adoption of the Federal Law No. 538-FZ of 27 December 2018, including:

- to launch a wide expert and public discussion of the problem of spawning forest zones protection, including a joint meeting of the public councils of Federal Agency for Fisheries, Federal Forest Service and the Ministry of Agriculture of Russia, conducting relevant research on ecological functions of spawning forest zones, the assessment of relations between the state of forests, fish productivity, water regime of rivers and logging activities;

- as a result of the discussion and research to amend the Forest Code, defining scientifically-grounded criteria for the establishment of spawning forest zones, which will ensure effective conservation of spawning grounds of valuable fish species;

- before the adoption of science-based decisions about how to preserve the existing spawning forest zones (by establishing new criteria for their selection, transition into other categories of protected forests, the establishment of protected areas of fisheries, expansion of conservation areas, etc.) the Federal Forest Agency shall avoid any actions that could lead to a reduction in the area of spawning forest zones, and not to approve any proposals from the subjects of the Russian Federation to change their existing borders;

- FSC-certified logging companies should comply with the currently existing borders and the regime of the spawning forest zones in the framework of the identification and preservation of high conservation value forests.

20 March 2019



N.M. Shmatkov, Forest Program Director, WWF-Russia

A.Yu. Yaroshenko, Head of Forest Department, Greenpeace Russia

