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## Tom Frey email interview about United States - Russian smokejumper exchanges

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Email correspondence from Tom Frey to the National Smokejumper Association, September 2023, in response to background information in preparation for *US–Russian Smokejumper Exchanges: 1976–2004*.

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**Question: Are you aware of Andreev’s tenure? Was there a transition to a new head/director of the Aerial Forest Center at Puskinno during your NIFC time? Did you meet Andreev?**

I don't remember when he retired but I think it was around 2003. By 2004, Nicolay Kovalev was the Director of the Aerial Forest Fire Center. He was the head of the delegation that we hosted here in the US in October 2004. I have two attachments below which I found today. I wrote both in early October 2004. The first was a list of potential exchanges for the future and the second was a statement of cooperation between BLM and FS and the Russians. I guess I was getting ready for things to discuss in case we decided to continue our exchanges. In looking back at the statement of cooperation today, I was surprised that I included a signature spot for FS because although we had coordinated with FS on who was doing what, our exchanges were independent of each other. The format for the statement of cooperation was one I stole from reading lots of UN statements over the years.

**Question: In making arrangements for exchanges, did you make formal agreements prior to exchanges? Or were general understandings from past interaction sufficient enough for new exchanges?**

When I arrived in 1998, my understanding from my supervisor, Les Rosenkrance, was that we were doing exchanges to benefit each other and my job was to make it happen. So as far as I knew all the exchanges we were doing were based on gentlemen's agreements that grew out of the Vancouver International Wildland Fire Conference. And even the formal agreement I proposed for the 2004 meeting was pretty much just fluff. One

thing that is important to remember is that FS has legislative authority to work internationally and has dedicated funds for certain activities. We in BLM were in a sense really hanging out there as far as having authorities to do our exchanges. Luckily, during my tenure, our BLM exchanges with Russia never had any issues with higher management in BLM or Interior.

**Question: Were you aware of other bases (maybe McCall or Missoula) conducting their own interactions for exchanges during the mid-90s–early 2000s?**

I was not aware of any other SMJ exchanges other than BLM. By then BLM had gone to the Ram Airs which of course were similar to the Russian systems, in that BLM borrowed some of their procedures and equipment design. So if the FS was doing any exchanges they were probably only discussions of tactics, techniques, procedures and equipment on the ground.

**Question: You indicate the last interaction you, in your position, had was 2004. Do you have any general knowledge of exchanges (of any personnel) elsewhere after that point?**

None that I know of as far as BLM exchanges.

**Question: Are you aware of any written agreements above your NIFC position that influenced your work in the mid-90–early 2000s?**

Not as far as exchanges. There were official agreements with Canada, and arrangements with Australia and New Zealand, and a limited agreement about border fires with Mexico. These were all signed and agreed to by NIFC and DC interagency wildland fire managers. And they involved operational fire activities not just static exchanges.

**Question: Do you know of any NIFC reports that were generated during your tenure regarding exchanges (i.e., documentation, narratives)?**

I know of none. I would do a write up of the exchanges for my year end evaluation (where my previous email notes came from) but I was never charged to write up anything cumulative about the program. I should note that when I left NIFC-BLM, the international program was handed over to a staff member as collateral duties, which was really the end of the program at NIFC. I think the hosting of international guests (not exchanges) went back to NIFC Public Affairs Office.

**Question: During your time what effect did exchanges have for SJing (e.g., goodwill, equipment, parachutes, training....)?**

Yes, I think the exchanges were appreciated by most of the people in both the Russian and BLM SMJ organizations for all the reasons you mentioned. Les's goal was to have BLM fire folks who participated in these exchanges understand and take pride that they were part of a larger group of unique people who were facing similar issues in wildland fire management around the world.

**Question: What do you think the Russians gained from exchanges?**

Yes, anytime you are placed in a new and challenging environment(culturally, language, systems, procedures, etc,) where you have some background you are bound to gain new perspectives on how to do/improve your job back home. I remember one Russian SMJ who we sent to Elko to be on a helitack crew for six weeks. When he arrived in Boise he was very quiet and reserved, due to this very new environment and his lack of English skills. And he may have never been out of Russia. When I drove down to pick him up in Elko six weeks later he came up to me with a huge smile and gave me a Russian bear hug that bent my aviator sunglasses that were hanging on my chest. Even though his English hadn't improved much he was very happy and had had an amazing

experience including going on several fires. But his enthusiastic greeting may have also been related to the money he made in those six weeks.

I will now try to fill in some of the yearly activities from my old files...unfortunately with gaps...

**1998:**

-I didn't arrive at NIFC until September so I was not involved in setting up any exchanges that year.

**1999:**

- Sent 2 Boise SMJs to Russia in May and 2 from AK in late July
- 4 Russian SMJs came to Boise
- 2 Russian SMJ/Rapellars went to Elko on a helitack crew

**2000:**

- No BLM SMJs to Russia
- 4 Russian SMJs came to Boise

**2001:**

- My notes: 2 Russian SMJs will arrive in Boise on May 23 to begin a 6 week exchange with BLM SMJs. The 2 Russians will receive an orientation on NIFC and the BLM SMJ program. The exchange also includes working with BLM SMJs in AK. The Russians will be bringing some innovative Russian parachute design work to share with BLM SMJs. End notes. I am not sure if they jumped the equipment they brought or if they jumped any fires using AK SMJ gear.
- No BLM SMJs to Russia in 2001 other than Tom to the 70th anniversary celebration that he mentioned with me and our boss at the time Larry Hamilton. Les, had retired in 2000.

**2002:**

- 3 Russian SMJs were in Boise for 5 weeks to observe rookie training. Not sure if they ever jumped
- From my notes about their visit: In a closeout with the Russians, they thanked BLM for the opportunity to observe the rookie training program. They went on to comment that they had learned a great deal and had identified several ways to improve their rookie program. Those attending

from the BLM side said it had been a successful 5 weeks and that they had also learned much from the Russians. End of notes.

- Don't have any notes that we sent SMJs to Russia.

**2003:** I am missing my notes so I do not know if we had an exchange but I do remember that by this time we were running out of reasons for the exchanges. There were other issues as well. Eduard Davidenko was our main counterpart for the exchanges because of his position as the chief of their Department of Science and Technology and because he spoke relatively good English. However, after repeatedly assuring us that whomever he sent to the US would have good English skills we would more often than not receive individuals with little to no English. On more than one occasion we would have to go to a local interpretive service to have interpreters go with Russians. Otherwise there would have been no exchange of any kind. This never happened with the SMJ exchanges because one of the Russian SMJs, Andrey, had very good English and came more than once and of course Bruce played a key role in interpreting with the SMJs for many years. Another issue was with some of the people that Eduard picked. It seemed like he was playing favorites with employees he knew and liked and who would be in his debt because of the money they were able to make over here even if it was only the per diem they received, which on returning home could amount to months of salary. And due to the language barrier and/or the competence of the individuals, I sometimes felt we got very little out of the folks that Eduard picked.

**2004:**

- I do not believe we had any exchanges in 2004 except for an "exchange" with high level folks from Avialesookhrana in October. The first attachment is who was in their delegation and the second attachment is the agenda for the meeting in DC. They came to Boise first for meetings and to look at our budgeting process and our fuels management programs, at least that was the reason we used for the exchange! The delegation also went to Oregon to look at some fuels management programs. But the real reason for this "exchange" was to sit down with their top level folk to say diplomatically, that unless we can come up with more concrete reasons to continue these exchanges things would have to change. I am not sure if they got the message but to the best of my recollection, that was the last official exchange with Russia by BLM