

The Arctic Council's Arctic Wildland Fires Initiative: new methodological ideas for an institution in crisis

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Wildland fires (or wildfires) are a challenge in many parts of the world. In recent years, the threat of wildfires has increased significantly also in the Arctic. The devastating effects have been seen around the wider Arctic region. As climate change is fundamentally changing climate, risks, environment and human safety in the Arctic, the problem of wildland fires is likely to get worse in the future.¹ Given the emergence of wildland fires as a shared threat and common concern in the Arctic, the Arctic Council has begun to address wildland fires as the challenge that they already are today.

In October 2023, the Norwegian chair of the Arctic Council launched a new Arctic Wildland Fires Initiative. The purpose of this initiative is to improve cooperation in the region and to facilitate the distribution of information.² While the initiative is new in that it was officially launched after

Norway had taken over the chair of the Arctic Council from Russia in 2023, it is not a new concern for the Arctic Council.

The Arctic Wildland Fires Initiative builds on the Circumpolar Wildland Fire Project of the Arctic Council's Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response Working Group (EPPR). The EPPR Working Group "strives to be the premier international forum for collaboration on prevention, preparedness and response issues in order to advance risk mitigation and improve response capacity and capabilities in the Arctic".³ As an institution, it is old for Arctic governance standards, having been established in 1991⁴ to deal with issues of common concern in the Arctic. Since then, the EPPR has generated an enormous amount of knowledge that benefits communities

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¹ See Arctic Council (2023). Wildland Fire, <https://arctic-council.org/explore/topics/climate/wildland-fire/> (all URLs were last visited on 2023-11-10).

² Arctic Council (2023). Norwegian chairship launches initiative to address wildland fires in the Arctic, <https://arctic-council.org/news/norwegian-chairship-arctic-wildland-fires-initiative/>.

³ EPPR (2023). About, <https://eppr.org/about/>.

⁴ Ibid.

across the Arctic.⁵ Already in the past, the EPPR's work has been essential for the creation of two landmark international treaties in the Arctic, the Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic⁶ (Arctic SAR Agreement) and the Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic⁷ (MOPPRA). Since the middle of the last decade, however, the use of the expertise that has been generated under the auspices of the Arctic Council by member states for the creation of international treaties has been on hold. This already indicated a problematic relationship between Arctic Council member states and international law - to be more precise, a problematic relationship between one member state and international law. The Russian Federation has long left international law and is actively opposing the very idea of an international order that is based on legally binding rules. With the war against

Georgia in 2008 and the war against Ukraine since 2014, but also with numerous human rights violations at home and abroad, including in Syria, Russia has shown its disregard for international law. With this choice, Russia has left the basis on which international Arctic governance has been built since the late 1980s. It appears highly unlikely that the member states will return to creating internationally legally binding treaties together anytime soon. Part of the disaster response in case of wildfires could be conducted within the framework of the Arctic SAR Agreement, but it seems extremely unlikely that the member states will create a binding international treaty on Arctic wildfires anytime soon. For the time being, Western Arctic states should in general refrain from in-depth cooperation with the Russian Federation.

That Norway was able to move the idea of the Arctic Wildland Fires Initiative forward is remarkable because the Arctic

⁵ For an overview over EPPR publications see <https://eppr.org/resources/publications/>. EPPR databases and tools are available on the website of the EPPR as well: the Arctic Marine Risk Assessment Guideline Web Based Solution (<https://eppr.dnvgl.com/>), the Circumpolar Oil Spill Response Viability Analysis Web Portal (<https://maps.dnv.com/cosrva/>) and the Arctic Environmental Response Management Application Arctic ERMA with EPPR Arctic Oil Spill response Database (<https://erma.noaa.gov/arctic#layers=3+18641+18640+18638+18639+18630+18629+18633+18631+18628+18627+18626+18272+18590&x=-161.91096&y=64.76126&z=3.7&panel=layer>).

⁶ Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic, adopted 2011, entered into force 2013, <http://hdl.handle.net/11374/531>.

⁷ Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic, adopted 2013, entered into force 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/11374/529>.

Council is in a time of unprecedented crisis. Since March 2022, cooperation between the seven Western Arctic states and the Russian Federation has been on hold in response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the escalation by Moscow since February 2022. However, already in 2023, while Russian forces continue to attack civilians in Ukraine, committing war crimes and, with the forced transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia, acts of genocide against the people of Ukraine, the united front in the Western Arctic appears to be weakening as Western Arctic states have begun to explore ways to continue cooperating in the Arctic Council. While the issues that the Arctic Council is dealing with are important, there must not be any cooperation with the aggressor state or entities that are de facto controlled by it. This must also include cooperation within working groups and experts must not hide behind the veil of science to advance agendas such as scientific cooperation that provide de facto benefits for the genocidal regime. As the situation is currently, with large parts of the country and public officials across the Russian Federation supporting the war of aggression against Ukraine, it has become extremely difficult

to make a meaningful distinction between the Russian state and individual Russian experts who happen to be in the employ of the Russian state. Many people in the Russian Arctic have been affected by wildfires, too, and there would be potential to learn from Russian expertise, but Moscow has closed the door to effective cooperation in the Arctic.

The international governance of the Arctic is built on respect for international law. This respect is absent in Moscow. Therefore, the Russian Federation is no longer a trusted partner in the Arctic, which affects the effectiveness of the Arctic Council as an institution. The political situation and the paralysis of the Arctic Council make initiatives like the one initiated now by Norway even more important. Led by the Gwich'in Council International (GCI), the Circumpolar Wildland Fire Project has been ongoing since 2019. In 2021, several working groups came together in the Arctic Wildland Fire Sharing Circle, the results of which were published in March 2022.⁸ This event not only proved the usefulness of sharing circles as tools for addressing interdisciplinary issues,⁹ but can also be

⁸ Arctic Council (2022). Arctic Wildland Fire Sharing Circle Summary Report 2022, Tromsø: Arctic Council Secretariat, <https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/a36941c5-7856-4ea3-83f2-a4e1504d1399/content>.

⁹ Ibid, p. 13.

considered a stepping stone on the way to more action on Arctic wildland fires.¹⁰ The initiative that has been launched by Norway in 2023 can be seen as an additional step in the same direction. That this initiative has been begun is laudable but in order to be effective and to generate practical benefits for the people who live in the Arctic, an active role of all actors is required, including all levels of government. This requires respect for people, for the need for human safety and for human rights in general. This respect is no longer present in Russia and the general lack of respect for international law in Moscow makes it unlikely that the creation of new international treaties involving all eight Arctic states will be seen as practical tools for Arctic governance in the near future.

As cooperation in the Arctic is evolving to become more of a cooperation between the seven states of the Western Arctic, there is a risk that a hypothetical international governance framework that might one day

replace the Arctic Council (although such a new system is currently not desired by the states of the Western Arctic) would be focused exclusively on states and would reduce the role of indigenous representative organizations in the international governance of the Arctic. The very strong role of Arctic indigenous representative organizations in the Arctic Council,¹¹ as it was codified in the 1996 Ottawa Declaration¹² that created the Arctic Council, might be at risk. The Arctic Council's work on wildland fires is based on the recognition of the value of local, in particular indigenous, knowledge about the Arctic¹³ and emphasises the exchange of knowledge and the building of networks.¹⁴ The introduction of the sharing circle as a collaborative tool within the work of the Arctic Council marks a new method of cooperation and exchange of knowledge that might be utilized in the future in other contexts as well. Sharing circles should not be seen as a way to replace scientific knowledge exchanges but

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 14.

¹¹ See Timo Koivurova & Leena Heinämäki (2006). "The Participation of Indigenous Peoples in International Norm-Making in the Arctic", in: 42 *Polar Record*, pp. 101-109.

¹² Ottawa Declaration (1996). <https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/items/fb29e6d2-d60c-43ca-8e46-fa7a505033e0>.

¹³ See Arctic Council (2020). As millions of acres burn in the Arctic creating a common language around wildfire management is key, <https://arctic-council.org/news/creating-a-common-language-around-wildfire-management/>; Arctic Council (2022). A new format to strengthen Arctic wildland fire cooperation, <https://arctic-council.org/news/a-new-format-to-strengthen-arctic-wildland-fire-cooperation/>.

¹⁴ Arctic Council (2022). A new format to strengthen Arctic wildland fire cooperation, <https://arctic-council.org/news/a-new-format-to-strengthen-arctic-wildland-fire-cooperation/>.

as an additional tool for collecting and exchanging different kinds of expertise. The Arctic Council's new Wildland Fires Initiative has the potential to enhance cooperation on an important issue and to enhance the sharing of information across the Arctic. So far, it is located in the tradition of the Arctic Council's scientific work on issues of common concern in the Arctic. At the same time does the initiative

respond to an increasingly important problem that is relevant across the circumpolar Arctic - and elsewhere. The initiative therefore could also be seen as a tool to enhance the cooperation between the Arctic Council and other organizations outside the Arctic, in particular in other parts of the world where wildfires are a significant problem, too.

