

Putin Fires Top Forest Official After Fires

August 22, 2010

The  Moscow Times

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on Friday dismissed the head of the Federal Forestry Agency over criticism that he did little to combat deadly forest fires that were unleashed by a record heat wave and blanketed Moscow in smoke.

Putin fired Alexei Savinov at a government meeting and replaced him with his deputy, Viktor Maslyakov.

Critics have said the Forest Code, rushed through the State Duma in 2006 on Putin's orders, was the main cause of devastating wildfires that raged over Central Russia because the law disbanded a centralized system of forest protection.

Russian forests cover 809 million hectares, twice the size of the European Union's landmass. But the new legislation deprived the Federal Forestry Agency of important powers to oversee them, critics said.

Putin on Friday also pledged another 2.7 billion rubles (\$88.52 million) in aid for wildfire victims, on top of 5 billion rubles he had promised earlier.

Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu told a news conference Thursday that the cost of extinguishing fires across Russia, as well as funds allocated to building new houses, had reached 12 billion rubles (\$394.2 million).

President Dmitry Medvedev lifted the state of emergency on Friday in the Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod regions, as well as the republic of Mordovia, after torrential rain gave much respite to the capital at the end of the country's most severe heat wave ever recorded.

The heat and wildfires are expected to shave \$14 billion off this year's gross domestic product, and have shriveled grain crops. Moscow's top health official said the acrid smoke doubled Moscow's normal death rate.

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