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Smog Jitters Start as the First Fires Break Out

By Natalya Krainova

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As warm May weather revives memories of the smog that caused the capital to choke for weeks last summer, the Emergency Situations Ministry has offered assurances that it has control over the source of the air pollution — burning peat bogs and forests in the Moscow region.

Yevgeny Sekirin, head of the ministry's branch in the region, acknowledged that bogs and forests have started smoldering outside Moscow but said the total affected area is relatively small.

Sekirin, speaking on Ekho Moskvy radio on Friday, said 18 forest fires covering 21 hectares and five peat bogs on 1.3 hectares are burning in the Moscow region. In addition, he said, 2,500 grass fires occupying an area of about 32 hectares have been put out since the start of the year.

No casualties were reported.

Greenpeace Russia has accused the ministry of downplaying the issue by tweaking the wildfire statistics. The watchdog did not provide its own statistics but said on its web site Thursday that there were "several dozen fires" in the Sergiyevo-Posadsky district of the Moscow region that firefighters were ignoring.

The ministry has accused Greenpeace of misreporting wildfires, but the group denied the accusations, saying Thursday that its volunteers were busy fighting fires in an area that the ministry declared smoke-free. The claims could not be immediately reconciled.

Last summer, some 1,000 peat bog fires broke out over 1,500 hectares of the Moscow region, Moscow region Deputy Governor Nikolai Pishchev told Rossiiskaya Gazeta in late April. Nationwide, the total area engulfed by wildfires reached 200,000 hectares last summer.

Carelessness was to blame for most of the fires, Sekirin said. He did not elaborate. But he told Prime-Tass last year that only 10 percent of peat bog fires are due to natural causes, as opposed to carelessly discarded cigarette butts or the mishandling of fire by people on camping trips.

Peat bogs occupy 254,000 hectares in the Moscow region, Pishchev said. About 65,000 hectares of those, mostly in the eastern and southern parts of the region, need to be flooded to prevent fires.

About 22,000 hectares will be flooded this year, with the rest to follow by 2013, Pishchev said, adding that the flooding program would cost a total of 3.7 billion rubles ($133 million).

Funding for preventing and combating wildfires in the Moscow region stands this year at 636 million rubles ($23 million), "hundreds of times" more than in 2010, Pishchev told Interfax on Friday, without elaborating. Another 173 million rubles is reserved for the same purpose in regional and municipal budgets.

More than 3,700 volunteers are ready to help professional firefighters in the Moscow region this summer, Pishchev said. He conceded, however, that this might not be enough.

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