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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Program to Provide $82M to Parks

By Irina Filatova

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Some of the planned funding will go to communications systems that will help park rangers defend against poachers. **Vladimir Filonov**

The government will spend a total of 2.4 billion rubles ($82 million) on a targeted program to develop specific nature reserves across the country over the next three years, as part of an ambitious preservation project, Natural Resources Minister Yury Trutnev said Monday.

About 1.5 billion rubles will be spent on building infrastructure, with the remaining funds allotted for transportation and communications services aimed to monitor the territory of reserves and fight poaching, he said at a meeting with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

The ministry examined more than 200 specially protected natural areas to choose 12 of the highest priority to be developed by 2013, Trutnev said, as people currently have limited access to the country's nature reserves — which are poorly developed and have no appropriate infrastructure.

Financing will be provided for 10 nature reserves and two national parks, like Baikalo-Lensky

and Baikalsky nature reserves on the coast of Lake Baikal, Vrangel Island located between the East Siberian and Chukchi seas and the Caucasus nature reserve.

"Work of such a scale has never been undertaken in Russia before," Trutnev said.

He also said his ministry plans to build about 180 museums, 98 recreation places, as well as 290 tourist routes in the nature reserves, which will allow the number of visitors to double to 12 million a year by 2013.

Putin said that visiting the nature reserves must be affordable for people with low incomes. Trutnev promised that prices would be "minimal."

Last year, Putin pushed to develop domestic ecological tourism in order to attract not only local residents but also visitors from abroad.

Trutnev said at the time that the country's national parks could be profitable, just like in the United States.

He complained that the Geyser Valley in the U.S. Yellowstone national park has 2 million visitors a year, while a similar valley in Russia's Kamchatka region has only 3,000 visitors annually.

National parks in the United States bring $14.5 billion a year, Trutnev said. "If we invest in national parks and nature reserves ... we'll see this money return to the budget."

Meanwhile analysts said such projects in Russia are unlikely to bring high profit.

"Reaching a break-even point is the best that one can expect from such a project," said Yana Kuzina, head of the strategic consulting and valuation department at CB Richard Ellis.

National parks are designed to be cultural and ecological sites rather than sources of profit, she said by telephone.

Trutnev also asked to extend financing of the program through 2020, saying 800 million rubles will be needed annually to expand it to the country's about 200 other nature reserves after 2013.

Putin promised to discuss the issue at the presidium meeting.

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