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$620M Earmarked for Environmental Cleanup Program

By Roland Oliphant

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Lake Baikal, the Franz Josef Archipelago and Wrangel Island will be the first nature reserves to benefit from a 20 billion ruble ($620 million) environmental cleanup program, Natural Resources and Environment Minister Yury Trutnev said.

The cleanup program, which will extend through 2020, will target 194 sites of critical environmental contamination, Trutnev said.

"This is not a dump, it's something much worse. There are often thousands of tons of waste, often toxic, [which] sometimes have a significant impact on the environment," he said Friday in comments carried by Interfax.

On Wrangel Island alone there are more than 2,000 barrels containing oil products, he said.

Scientists returning from a preliminary "spring cleaning" expedition to Franz Josef Land

on Thursday said they had counted about 400,000 fuel barrels and 700 tanks of gasoline and lubricants scattered across the archipelago — many of which have leaked after years of exposure to the harsh Arctic climate.

Most of the pollution in Russia's far northern islands dates from the Soviet era, when they hosted large military bases. Much of the pollution lies in a newly established Russian Arctic national park.

Tenders will be called for the cleanup operation, Trutnev said.

Meanwhile, tourist trips to the newly created Arctic Russian national park in the northern part of Novaya Zemlya and Franz Josef Land may end because ice breakers are needed for the northern sea route, Vesti television reported Friday.

Atomflot, a subsidiary of Rosatom that runs Russia's nuclear-powered ice-breaker fleet, told the station that all of its vessels might be needed to escort commercial ships along the northern sea route between Europe and Asia.

About 865 tourists have visited the park since it was created in April, according the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry.

Trutnev, who spoke Friday in Perm after a meeting on the management of the Kama River system, said the government would invest 290 billion rubles ($9 billion) on infrastructure for the country's internal waterways.

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