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Transparency Prerequisite to Green Responsibility

By Roland Oliphant

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A lack of transparency in some companies and poor legislation are hampering efforts to push Russian firms to account for their impact on the environment, business representatives and economists said Wednesday.

"Companies are not obliged to give us the environmental information we ask for," said Polina Zakharova of Mosekomonitoring, the agency that monitors air quality and other environmental indicators in the capital.

Alexander Martynov, director of the Interfax Environmental Ratings Agency, which ranks companies and regions on their environmental responsibility, criticized the "extreme closedness" of some Moscow companies.

"Unwillingness to answer our questions is already an indicator of a lack of responsibility," he said.

Regions he singled out for openness included Tatarstan, one of very few Russian regions where economic growth has been matched by a rise in the ERA's environmental efficiency index.

Tatarstan is second only to the Moscow region for energy and technical efficiency — largely a factor of modern equipment and minimized energy consumption.

The city of Moscow itself lags several places behind on that count.

The agency, which started out as an independent project in 2001, began cooperation with Interfax, the strategic partner for Moody's in Russia, earlier this year. Martynov says his aim is to become as high-profile and profitable as financial ratings agencies over the next few years.

"There are potential customers for our product," he told The Moscow Times at a conference on corporate environmental responsibility on Wednesday. "When foreign investors decide whether to put money into a company, the environmental record is increasingly important."

The ratings agency joins a string of initiatives, including building construction standards and energy-efficiency certificates, aimed at incentivizing companies to raise their environmental spending.

But there needs to be more awareness in society before companies will truly realize the PR potential of green projects.

"Our single greatest challenge in promoting corporate environmental responsibility is a lack of information," said Alexei Kostin, executive director of the nonprofit Corporate Social Responsibility Center. "The public has to know what is going on."

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