

Mezentsev Wants Specific Timeline for Mill Closure

By [Roland Oliphant](#)

January 24, 2012

The  **Moscow Times**

The governor of the Irkutsk region called for a “real deadline” to close the controversial Baikal Pulp and Paper Mill.

Dmitry Mezentsev said in an interview on the Vesti-24 television channel that the plant is bound to close but added that the issue had to be looked at seriously, his press office said Tuesday.

“This option should follow real deadlines for deciding environmental and social problems and guaranteed employment for workers at the plant and real perspectives for economic development of the area,” he said, according to his press office. The interview was not broadcast by the end of the workday Tuesday.

The Baikal Pulp and Paper Mill is the only industrial enterprise that dumps waste into Lake Baikal, a UNESCO world heritage site. It was closed in late 2008, but was allowed to reopen by

government decree in January 2010.

Environmentalists from local campaign group Baikal Environmental Wave welcomed the sentiment but took the promise with a pinch of salt.

“These promises are not new, but unfortunately there is nothing concrete,” a spokesman said by telephone. “It could just be a political move to win public sympathy — it is a very hot topic here in Irkutsk,” he added.

Mezentsev was kicked out of the presidential race Monday when the Central Elections Commission ruled he had collected too few signatures to run. He was widely viewed as a straw-man candidate meant to ensure that the election could go ahead if all other opposition candidates pulled out.

Local officials made no mention of closing the plant at a meeting with environmentalists Friday, said Marina Rikhvanova, chairwoman of the Baikal Wave group.

World Wildlife Fund director Igor Chestin, who said he discussed the issue with both Mezentsev and Oleg Deripaska, who used to control the mill through his Basic Element holding, said last summer that it was not a surprise.

“When we met it was clear that they were quite pessimistic about the future of the mill, from an economic viewpoint. Many of us were expecting an announcement like this in the second half of 2011,” he said by telephone.

Deripaska sold his controlling share in Kontinentalinvest, the company that owns a majority stake of the mill in 2010. In July of last year, he successfully sued Kontinentalinvest for repayment of a 150 million ruble loan (\$4.8 million) he made to the mill, Vedomosti reported.

The current ownership structure of the mill is “a big question,” said Rikhvanova. No one was available to comment at Kontinentalinvest on Tuesday afternoon. Calls to Basic Element went unanswered.

“Closing the mill is one of the options we are looking at, but the decision itself will be made at the Cabinet level,” said a spokeswoman for the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry, which with the Economic Development Ministry is compiling recommendations on the future of the mill for the prime minister. She declined to reveal the deadline for the report.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/01/24/mezentsev-wants-specific-timeline-for-mill-closure-a12104>