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$20M Fine for Siberian Forest Fire

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Correction appended

A young man who ignited a Siberian forest fire with a carelessly discarded cigarette butt has been ordered to pay an unheard-of 581 million rubles ($19.6 million) in damages.

Alexander Malkov, 21, threw a burning cigarette butt into dry grass near Klyuchi village in the republic of Buryatia in June 2009, said a spokesman for the republic's prosecutor's office.

"He saw that fire had spread to grass and trees, but he did not take any measures to put out the flames and left the burning area," the unidentified spokesman told RIA-Novosti.

The damage from the fire that consumed 2,000 hectares was assessed at 581 million rubles — the amount of that a local court ordered Malkov to pay. Malkov was also ordered to fulfill a year of community service.

Meanwhile, unseasonably warm weather and strong winds in the far eastern Primorye region prompted a warning Tuesday about a possible outbreak in forest fires.

"Dry and hot weather with wind gusts of 17 meters per second are expected to settle in the south and west of the Primorye region on April 10 and 11," the local branch of the Emergency Situations Ministry said in a statement carried by RIA-Novosti. "This may result in wildfires, which pose a danger of spreading in residential areas located near forests."

The ministry said five forest fires have been registered in the region within the last 24 hours, and three of them have been put out.

Last month, fires consumed thousands of hectares in a federal nature reserve home to rare Amur leopards.

Devastating forest and peat bog fires in the summer of 2010 put the country on edge after destroying homes and crops and killing over 60 people. Smoke from the fires covered Moscow in a suffocating haze for weeks.

Correction: An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated that the fire caused by Alexander Malkov's cigarette had burned two hectares of forest. In fact, it burned 2,000 hectares.

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