

Moscow Region Governor Slams Forest's Destruction

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Activists removing a fence in Zhukovsky Forest, in the Moscow region, and a confrontation between protesters and police, on April 30. **Alexandra Odynova**

The new governor of the Moscow region offered a strong show of support Tuesday for activists who stood against the clearance of a local forest that was recently cut down to make way for a road, calling the situation an “outrage.”

Sergei Shoigu harshly criticized officials in Zhukovsky for allowing the forest to be cut and called for the creation of a commission involving public groups to find a solution to the situation, which has polarized public opinion in the city just to the southeast of Moscow.

“The construction is going on and citizens are angry. If there is a need to make a gubernatorial order not to cut a single tree more, I will do it,” Shoigu said during a meeting with Zhukovsky officials, Interfax reported Tuesday.

According to activists, 12 hectares of the roughly 100 hectares of forest have already been cut down as part of a project to construct a road to the site of the MAKS aviation show just outside the city, which is named in honor of Russian aviation pioneer Nikolai Zhukovsky.

The road is part of a \$4.4 billion plan to build a National Aviation Center ordered by President Dmitry Medvedev in 2008.

The environmental activists had argued for a different route that would have bypassed the city and spared the forest.

Shoigu demanded that officials respond to claims by activists that about a quarter of the trees cleared were removed illegally.

"If this happened, I need to find the people who are responsible and punish them or remove them," he said.

Calling it a "public outrage," Shoigu questioned the original 2009 hearings that led to the start of construction.

Zhukovsky Mayor Alexander Bobovnikov argued that the majority of the city's 100,000 citizens support the road's construction.

But Natalya Znamenskaya, editor of the city's only independent newspaper, Zhukovskye Vesti, has accused city officials of forging signatures to make it appear as if people who were against the project actually supported it.

Local activists say that Shoigu's sudden interest in the situation, which he inherited from his predecessor Boris Gromov, might be a sign that senior officials are looking for a face-saving solution.

"There is a hope that something might change with Shoigu," said Nikolai Kachnov, who campaigned against cutting down the forest.

But Kachnov said that plans to create the commission had not yet been announced and that trees continued to be cut down.

"There have been words but no deeds yet," said one activist, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of his involvement in the negotiating process with local government officials.

The uproar over the aviation center's construction had earlier caught the attention of Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, who oversees the government's aviation sector.

Rogozin has asked prosecutors to examine allegations that property belonging to state-owned aviation companies involved in the center's construction was sold illegally.

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