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Paper Mill That Polluted Baikal to Become Russian Disneyland

By The Moscow Times

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The Baikalsk Paper and Pulp Mill sitting on the shores of Lake Baikal surrounded by tons of its own toxic waste.

Correction appended

The architecture institute behind the renovation of Moscow's famous Red October candy factory has drawn up plans to convert an abandoned paper mill that polluted Lake Baikal for half a century into a theme park.

The project will be preceded by the largest environmental cleanup effort in Russian history.

Moscow's Strelka Institute, which turned Red October into one of the capital's hottest spots, wants to build a nature reserve, an ecological catastrophes museum and other tourist attractions on the site of the Baikalsk Paper and Pulp Mill. The mill, on the southern shore of the world's largest clean water lake, is expected to officially shut down in two to three months

due to financial problems, Izvestia reported Friday.

The Green Future environmental conservation fund is working with Stelka on the project and the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry has already backed the plans.

However, a massive cleanup operation will have to be carried out if the project, which has not yet been submitted to the government for approval, is to have any chance of being put into action.

The mill's more than 50 years of production have left a potentially ruinous ecological footprint. Thirteen reservoirs dotting the area surrounding the plant have been filled with 6.2 million tons of toxic waste.

The government has long been aware of the mill's environmental impact, but refrained from closing it due to fears of a social backlash. The mill is the major employer in the nearby town of Baikalsk, with a population of about 14,000.

In the coming days, VEB Engineering — a construction company owned by the mill's main creditor, state-owned Vneshekonombank, or VEB — will submit plans to the ministry for removing the waste and regenerating the area.

VEB Engineering's head, Dmitry Sheibe, said he hoped Strelka would come up with a Russian equivalent of Disneyland.

In June, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said 40 billion rubles ($1.1 billion) would be put toward closing the mill and cleaning up after it, but only 2.8 billion rubles had been allocated for the cleanup so far, which is nowhere near enough, Sheibe said.

A spokesman for the ministry said Friday that the state is in a position to provide more funds.

Though production stopped last year, the mill still has 740 staff on its books, most of whom live in Baikalsk. Their impending unemployment is another issue that needs to be resolved.

In the short term, the state will pay to retrain them for work in other fields or relocate them to areas where their current skills are in demand. Others could be paid to participate in the regeneration of the land around the mill.

The possibility of a major tourist attraction arriving would be one way of attracting investment and creating jobs.

About 750,000 tourists visit Lake Baikal yearly, according to VEB's research. Most of them are Russian.

Green Future's director, Vladimir Mikulik, thinks a theme park in Baikalsk would boost those figures.

National Geographic Russia's chief editor, Alexander Grek, said that convincing more tourists to visit Baikal will be a difficult task.

"You cannot swim in Lake Baikal in summer and in winter it is very cold," Grek said. "It is not

especially rich in terms of wildlife. The Zabaikalsky steppe is very dull and foreigners rarely spend more than two days at the lake. The landscape is very beautiful, but I have been there twice and I do not feel a strong urge to go back."

Editor's note: An earlier version of this story said that Dmitry Sheibe was the head of Vnesheconombank. In fact, he is the head of the bank's subsidiary, VEB Engineering.

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