

Russian Ecologists Warn Summer Could See Repeat of 2010 Wildfires

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Wildfires in the Russian region of Khakasia in southern Siberia have killed 15 people and caused damage worth at least \$96 million.

With fires already raging across parts of Siberia, Russia can expect "catastrophic" wildfires as bad as or worse than those that devastated parts of the country in summer 2010, some environmental experts say.

A mild winter with little snowfall, the early onset of spring with Moscow recording its warmest Easter in over a decade, the aftermath of last year's drought in European Russia and shortfalls in wildfire prevention in the country paint a bleak picture.

"All of Russia's regions are at a higher than average risk of wildfire outbreaks this year," Greenpeace forestry expert Alexei Yaroshenko said, with "guaranteed" fires in Siberia and the Far East.

Other experts were more cautious in their predictions for this summer. Alexander Bryukhanov, a forestry specialist for WWF Russia based in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk, said that the summer's fires will depend on the weather and that not all regions experienced low snowfall in winter, making the areas at particular risk difficult to predict.

Fires are already raging in the southern Siberian republic of Khakasia, where 30 people have lost their lives and about 5,000 others their homes. Authorities continued to battle the blazes over the weekend, and issued an outright ban on people entering the region's forests.

Emergency situations have also been declared in four other Russian republics and regions: Zabaikalsky, Buryatia and Krasnoyarsk in Siberia, as well as Amur in the Far East.

According to a report by the Russian forestries agency Rosleskhoz released in April, nine of Russia's 83 regions are unprepared for wildfires this year. Forty-seven regions are "prepared to some extent" and 26 are prepared. Crimea was not included in the inspection.

Forgotten Lessons

In 2010, wildfires raged across central and western Russia throughout the summer, killing dozens of people and destroying crops. Since then, the government has increased its efforts to prevent and tackle the problem, and last year the country saw a total of 44,539 wildfires, compared to 80,244 in 2010, according to figures released by the federal statistics agency. But some environmentalists say not enough is being done and warn that the lessons of 2010 are already being forgotten.

The 2015 government budget allocated for combatting wildfires is set to be significantly cut with the agreement of the State Duma — the lower house of the Russian parliament — this week, Yaroshenko said, with planned cuts and a weakened ruble resulting in a 20 percent reduction of the 2014 budget, which he said was already vastly inadequate.

"The budget will be concentrated on protecting areas of high population density and industry," said Vasily Tuzov, deputy director of the Russian Center of Forest Health.

"Although wildfires cover areas in the order of millions of hectares of forest, only 300,000 to 400,000 hectares of forest die as a result of fires each year — less than 1 percent of the total fire area," Tuzov said, so civilian lives and industry are inevitably prioritized under a tight budget.

Man Versus Nature

Tuzov told The Moscow Times that 70–80 percent of fires in Siberian reserve forests are naturally occurring, with lightning a common cause. "The reverse is true for European Russia, where about 70–80 percent of fires occur because of human activity, often grass burning," he said.

Controlled burning of fields is often done by farmers to promote crop growth but can easily get out of control. The wildfires still burning in Khakasia were caused by grass burning on farmland, experts believe. Suspects have been detained in connection with the fires but conviction is unlikely since proof is difficult to obtain: In recent years, with hundreds of fires

likely caused by humans in Russia, only a small handful of convictions have been made, Tuzov said.

The May holidays in Russia are a particularly dangerous period in terms of wildfires, all the experts agreed, as city dwellers flock to nature spots outside the city, light barbecues, drink and sometimes burn dry grass for fun, starting potentially deadly wildfires.

Some have more sinister theories regarding the sources of the deadly blazes. The presidential plenipotentiary for the Siberian federal district, Nikolai Rogozhkin, told Siberian media last week that he couldn't believe that the fires had simply occurred naturally and spontaneously, and suggested that a group of "specially trained opposition" forces was lighting fires in the region.

Fatal Mistakes?

Environmentalists said during the 2010 fires that legislative mistakes were partly to blame for the country's inability to put out the fires, a position they stand by today.

Legislation passed in 2006 changed the previous structure under which expert foresters monitored and looked after a specific area of forest, tasked with swiftly identifying localized wildfires and preventing their spread. The 2006 regulation — which Yaroshenko called "uneconomical and corrupt" — cut the number of foresters to a tenth of its previous size, Tuzov said.

The 2006 reforms were well intended, Tuzov said — a much-needed modernization of the system, which hadn't been updated since perestroika. But both Tuzov and Yaroshenko said the restructuring was poorly thought through and had led to a worsening of a system that was already crippled.

Further problems arise because of the division of responsibility for different types of land (such as forest or arable land) and the reliance on effective, timely cooperation between the organizations, Yaroshenko said. Each type has its own organization to monitor and protect it, but drained peat bogs (mined in the Soviet Union to use as fuel) often go unmonitored, said Yaroshenko. They pose a substantial fire and smog hazard, since peat is carbon-rich, difficult to extinguish once ignited and its smoke can easily travel distances of 500 kilometers with the wind.

Russia employs the same number of government forest service inspectors as its much smaller neighbor Belarus, WWF's Bryukhanov told Slon magazine in a recent interview. Russia has about 1.2 billion hectares of forest — 150 times more forest than Belarus, which has less than 8 million hectares, he said.

Regional Variations

Bryukhanov, author of an article titled "12 Myths About Wildfires," said that while efforts have been made in European Russia — particularly in the Moscow region — to prevent a repeat of 2010, the rest of the country's fires and smog are likely to go unnoticed. He added that 2010 was by no means Russia's worst year for either smog or fires.

In 2012, Siberia suffered severe fires but it was only after the airport of Novosibirsk — Russia's third most populous city — was shut down due to heavy smog that mainstream Russian news stations began to pay the issue due attention, he said.

Effective regional governance plays a vital role in wildfire prevention and management, all the experts interviewed by The Moscow Times agreed.

Yaroshenko highlighted Tatarstan and Lipetsk as examples of good regional leadership that can overcome systemic difficulties. "These areas are prone to fires but they do not suffer deadly outbreaks," he said, adding that the reason for this is good regional management.

The Bryansk region is an example of where officially recognized forests are well managed but other types of land are not, leading to severe fires in certain parts of the region, he said.

What Is to Be Done?

Since the devastating fires of 2010 and 2012 the government has been reinstating foresters, but the numbers are still insufficient and lower than they were before the 2006 reforms, Tuzov said.

Sometimes, efforts made to forestall fires are simply not enough. Preventative measures had been taken in the areas of Siberia where fires broke out this year, Tuzov said, with nonflammable mineral stripes at least 1.5 meters wide painted onto the ground in order to isolate areas from one another and stop the spread of wildfires. The measures proved ineffective against high winds that spread the flames anyway.

Only rain can now stop the deadly wildfires ripping through Khakasia, the experts agreed.

While the Moscow region is far from Russia's most vulnerable area to wildfires, as in many policy areas, attention has focused on the capital to some extent, particularly following the thick black smog that engulfed the Russian capital during the 2010 fires.

Tuzov said there had been a 90 percent drop in fires in the Moscow region's forests since 2010. In response to the threat of wildfires, Moscow authorities will be shutting off areas of nearby forests for two weeks starting at the end of April, he said. He added that by the time the forests reopen, fresh grass should have grown, significantly reducing the risk of wildfire outbreak.

In addition, the reflooding of drained peat bogs following 2010's deadly wildfires should have a positive impact on reducing smog levels in the Moscow area, Tuzov said.

Public information campaigns in the Moscow area play an important role in wildfire prevention, but many people still ignore warnings about grass burning, he said, adding: "Old habits die hard."

WWF's Bryukhanov also calls for long-term public awareness campaigns on the dangers of grass burning and lighting fires, as well as harsh penalties for those responsible. Comparing it to drunk-driving, Bryukhanov said: "Before [the campaigns] people would drink and drive like it was normal. Now when someone wants to get in their car drunk their friends will stop them and say 'you might kill someone.' We need the same change in attitude

and awareness with wildfires."

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