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Massive Forest Fires Blaze in Russia's Siberia and Far East

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Large-scale wildfires that erupted this week in Siberia are worsening, Russia's local forest services have warned.

Firefighters in the far eastern Amur region are to focus on protecting local towns and villages as the fast spread of the fire is making the flames too difficult to extinguish in the forest, the RIA Novosti news agency reported Wednesday.

A wide range of equipment, including tractors, bulldozers and water carriers, is used to fight 24 wildfires raging in the area of more than 42,000 hectares, said a statement published on the region's governmental website.

The Russian Emergency Ministry has mobilized aircraft including B-200 and An-2 planes and Mi-8 helicopters to help firefighters cope in the most affected areas, RIA Novosti reported.

In the Buryatia region, where flames are spread out over an area of 18,800 hectares, firefighters were only able to extinguish 1,500 hectares in the last 24 hours.

Buryatia Forest Service press secretary Alexandra Egorova said that the enormous fires were caused by careless handling of flammable materials, the spread of fire from agricultural land, and power-line breakages.

In the Zabaikalye region, 11,000 hectares of forest are covered with fire, RIA Novosti reported Wednesday morning. One thousand rescuers and 155 units of equipment are currently involved in extinguishing the flames.

Some experts believe that the huge numbers given by the regional authorities are under-reported and that the forest fires could be even bigger, the Novaya Gazeta newspaper reported, citing the head of the Greenpeace forest program Alexei Yaroshenko.

The Amur region is one of the areas previously thought to be underestimating the size of forest fires, Novaya Gazeta reported. Provincial regions are rarely able to cope with large-scale fires due to a lack of money, people and machinery, while the Emergency Ministry cannot provide relevant assistance without knowing the real extent of disaster, Yaroshenko said.

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