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Russia Says Prevented Repeat Arctic Oil Disaster

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The May 2020 leak of 21,000 tons of diesel fuel is described as the Arctic's worst ecological disaster and has been linked to melting permafrost. **Kirill Kukhmar / TASS**

Russian scientists have prevented a repeat of last year's oil spill disaster near the Arctic city of Norilsk using satellite data, the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences said Thursday.

The May 2020 leak of 21,000 tons of diesel from a fuel tank is described as the Arctic's worst ecological disaster and has been linked to melting permafrost caused by climate change.

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Geologists from the Siberian Branch of the RAS said their study of satellite data gathered immediately after the spill predicted the imminent collapse of another fuel tank.

The scientists' model showed that the tank exhibited similar signs of failure to Thermal

Power Plant No. 3, which began sinking in August-September 2019 at a rate of 30-35 millimeters per year before ultimately being breached in May 2020.

“As soon as we understood the situation, we immediately conveyed our concerns to Norilsk, where they took urgent measures,” said Siberian Branch chairman Nikolai Dobretsov. “The cause of the disaster — the thawing of permafrost — was slowly spreading to another tank.”

“In effect, we have prevented another spill,” Dobretsov said in Thursday’s article for the Siberian Branch’s Science in Siberia news website.

Its authors said the prevention served as a real-life example of remote sensing technology helping to solve real-life problems across Russia’s vast territory.

“There are too few of us for this vast territory, so remote sensing and monitoring from afar is an extremely necessary and excellent tool for monitoring [the country’s] expanses,” said Dobretsov.

The fuel tanks are owned by a subsidiary of mining giant Nornickel. Following the May 2020 spill, Nornickel was ordered to pay a $2 billion fine, which President Vladimir Putin said would be spent on environmental improvement efforts in the Arctic.

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