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‘Worst Ever’ Air Pollution Event Hits Wildfire-Plagued Siberia

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Emergencies ministry of the republic of Sakha / 14.mchs.gov.ru

A northern Siberian region plagued by unprecedented fires is experiencing one of the world’s “worst ever” air pollution events with the concentration of pollutants in the air far exceeding global standards, according to The Guardian.

The republic of Sakha’s capital of Yakutsk has been under stay-home orders due to fast-spreading wildfires that blanketed dozens of cities with smoke and prompted regional authorities to declare a state of emergency nearly a month ago.

Related article: Climate Change Is ‘Main Cause’ of Siberia’s Wildfires, Regional Head Says

Atmospheric monitoring services have reported tiny particles of soot known as PM2.5 in Yakutsk at more than 40 times the World Health Organization’s recommended safe guideline. Screenshots shared by local residents showed readings 17 times worse than average in India’s and China’s most polluted cities.

Various air-quality apps describe the situation on the ground as "hazardous" and as an "airpocalypse," with advisories to close windows, keep babies indoors, wear masks outside and avoid outdoor exercise.

"High levels of particulate matter and possibly also chemicals including ozone, benzene and hydrogen cyanide are thought likely to make this one of the world's worst ever air pollution events," The Guardian reported.

Sakha, Russia's largest and coldest region, is particularly prone to wildfires due to more than 80% of its area covered by boreal forests known as the taiga.

With winter temperatures reaching as low as minus 60 degrees Celsius, Sakha has so far this year already seen record-breaking droughts and abnormally high temperatures — ideal conditions for severe wildfires.

Sakha Governor Aisen Nikolaev attributed the wildfires to climate change, saying Tuesday "we're living through the hottest, driest summer in the history of meteorological measurements."

Residents painted a dire picture of living close to the wildfires, telling The Guardian that they are "both depressed and angry" amid concerns for their relatives' health.

"The fires have touched absolutely every single person's life in Yakutia," said gym owner and volunteer firefighter Grigory Mochkin. "And since the smoke has gotten to Yakutsk, people are very vocal on social networks because every person's life has been affected."

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