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Siberian Officials Wage Denunciation Campaign Against Baikal Defenders

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Lake Baikal in winter. **Tatiana Viktorovna Sukmanova**

Officials in Russia's Irkutsk region in southeastern Siberia have publicly denounced activists seeking to block a controversial bill that would ease logging restrictions along the shores of Lake Baikal, the Govorit NeMoskva news outlet reported Monday.

In an open letter, 34 regional officials, including six mayors, accused environmental activists of waging a cyberbullying campaign and inciting "inter-social conflicts between the peoples of Baikal and the rest of Russia," according to excerpts from the letter published by Govorit NeMoskva.

Introduced in Russia's lower house of parliament this year, fresh amendments to the country's law on the protection of Lake Baikal — a UNESCO World Heritage site — seek to permit logging on as many as 75 plots of shoreland with a combined area of 762 hectares.

While the bill's backers say it will allow for a long-overdue development of basic infrastructure in the many remote towns and villages on the lake, ecologists believe it would

pave the way for mass commercial wood harvesting and the building of outsized tourism infrastructure.

Related article: New Bill Puts Russia's Lake Baikal at Risk of Deforestation, Harmful Urbanization

The open letter, which was sent to local media outlets, singled out activists Vitaliy Ryabtsev and Lyubov Alikina as the chief instigators of an alleged cyberbullying campaign against supporters of the bill who live on Baikal's shores.

The letter's authors called on President Vladimir Putin, the FSB and the Prosecutor General's Office to inspect activists' online publications and social media comments for traces of "hatred of Baikal's residents and the country's leadership."

Last month, Alikina published an official letter from the Prosecutor General's Office which stated that measures outlined in the new bill could indeed harm Baikal's unique ecosystem while yielding no direct benefits to local residents.

UNESCO's World Heritage Committee signaled earlier this year that adaptation of the controversial bill could result in Lake Baikal being added to its World Heritage in Danger list.

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