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Far East's Zabaikalsky Region Restricts Travel Amid Widespread Wildfires

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Authorities in Far East Russia's Zabaikalsky region on Thursday introduced movement restrictions in an effort to contain fast-spreading wildfires.

Residents must now obtain advance authorization from local officials to travel outside their communities, except when using regional or federal highways. Checkpoints will be installed at the entrances to all populated areas, according to a government order.

"The situation is extraordinary and exceptionally dangerous. Nearly the entire region is ablaze," Governor Alexander Osipov said in a televised address earlier this week. "Every day, dozens of settlements are endangered."

The restrictions aim to reduce the number of human-caused fires, which authorities say are largely sparked by the widespread and poorly regulated burning of dry grass.

Since the start of the year, Russia has recorded at least 680 wildfires covering more than

178,000 hectares (439,847 acres), Emergency Situations Minister Alexandr Kurenkov said.

As of Friday, more than 80% of those fires were located in the Zabaikalsky region, according to Russia's Aerial Forest Protection Service, which monitors the spread of wildfires.

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Zabaikalsky officials believe the scale of the 2024 wildfire season in the region will likely surpass last year's, which was already the worst in 15 years, with over 2 million hectares (4.9 million acres) burned by November. In contrast, just over 65,000 hectares (16,0618 acres) were burned in 2023.

Forest coverage in the Zabaikalsky region has decreased by 30% over the past three decades due to recurring wildfires, more than 70% of which are believed to be human-caused, Governor Osipov said.

Along with the republic of Buryatia and the Jewish autonomous region, Zabaikalsky is one of the leading regions in Russia using controlled burning for forest management. The technique involves setting low-risk fires in cooler seasons to reduce flammable debris ahead of the summer.

The federal government allocates significant funds annually for the practice.

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