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Wildfires in Zabaikalsky Region Inch Closer to Capital City

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Wildfires in Siberia's Zabaikalsky region are approaching the city of Chita, where residents are reporting smoke and flames on the outskirts as firefighters battle strong winds and dry conditions.

Chita, the regional capital with a population of 350,000, sits at the center of a federal-level state of emergency that has been in place for nearly a month. The Zabaikalsky region currently accounts for 96% of all wildfire-affected land in Russia, according to authorities.

On Tuesday morning, the local news outlet Chita.ru reported thick black smoke from a grass fire on the city's western edge. A larger fire, nearly nine times the size, was later reported southwest of the city.

Fire brigades were dispatched to both locations, according to the regional branch of Russia's Emergency Situations Ministry.

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In recent days, firefighters and volunteers have worked to contain blazes near the towns of Peschanka and Atamanovka. Crews had extinguished about 150 hectares (370 acres) of forest by Monday evening, officials said, though Atamanovka's administration called for additional volunteers and supplies on Tuesday, warning that fires continued to burn.

State Duma lawmaker Andrei Gurulyov told Chita.ru that firefighting efforts would remain limited until the weather changes.

"As long as there's no precipitation, we won't put out the fires," he said. "It will still smolder from a month and a half to three months until it's flooded with rain."

As of Tuesday morning, more than 670,000 hectares (1.6 million acres) of land were burning in the Zabaikalsky region, an increase of more than 150,000 hectares over the past week, according to Russia's Aerial Forest Protection Service.

Experts have blamed most of this year's wildfires on human activity, particularly the burning of dry grass near villages. A lack of snow cover and an early spring have also worsened conditions.

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