

# Forest fires kill 50 in central Russia

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6 August 2010

Forest and peat fires, resulting from sustained record high temperatures and unusually dry weather, have been raging across central Russia for over a week. As of Thursday, 50 people have died, 3,069 have lost their homes, and 1,902 apartment buildings and houses have been destroyed. In total, the blazes have engulfed as much as 500,000 hectares of land.

The deplorable state of Russia's infrastructure, the chronic underfunding of the country's firefighting capacity, and changes to government forestland-use policy that favors the interests of logging companies have contributed to the scale of the destruction.

On August 2, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev announced an emergency situation in the Republics of Mari El and Mordovia, as well as the Vladimir, Voronezh, Moscow, Nizhni Novgorod and Riazan Oblasts. The fires have also affected the Republic of Tatarstan and the Belgorod, Ivanovo, Kirov, Ulianovsk, Lipetsk, Tambov, and Tula Oblasts. Medvedev's directive gave the Defense Ministry, in addition to the Emergency Situations Ministry, authority to coordinate fire response efforts.

The Viksa District in Nizhni Novgorod Oblast has experienced some of the worst fires. Three villages—Verkhniaia Vereia, Semilovo, and Sharnavka—burned down entirely, and 20 people lost their lives. An inspection after the fact revealed that the towns had no firefighting equipment, no water supply system for firefighting, and no warning system for residents.

According to one Viksa blogger, after villagers had tried unsuccessfully for several days to protect their homes from the fires by digging trenches and using garden hoses, they hid in their wells and a nearby river while their houses were destroyed.

After the blaze passed, residents of Viska received a surprise visit from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu, and

Nizhni Novgorod Oblast Governor Valeri Shantsev. The villagers' initial response to the arriving leaders was hostile; the local mayor was beaten. In an effort to placate popular anger, Putin promised residents 210,000 rubles (about \$7,000) each. Nobody could explain how new homes could be built for such a miserly sum, but Putin reasserted his promise that the village would be rebuilt by winter, and then left.

In Moscow, which has a population of upwards of 11 million, air pollution from burning fires and peat bogs in the surrounding area has blanketed the city. Smog levels are at a forty-year peak. On August 4, carbon monoxide levels in parts of Moscow were as high as 2.6 times the maximum concentration considered safe for human health. The smell of smoke has been widely reported even within the underground subway system, requiring the activation of emergency ventilation facilities.

According to REN-TV, mortality in Moscow has risen to 10 times higher than normal since the beginning of the heat wave. There are supposedly plans, following scientists' proposals, to mitigate fire hazards and promote ecosystem balance by restoring water to the peat bogs by artificial means, but they will not begin until next year and will take three or four years to complete. Meanwhile, in spite of the officially declared emergency situation, the head of the Moscow Oblast Forestry Division, Sergei Goredeichenko, remains on vacation.

In response to the fires, the highest levels of the Kremlin have sprung into action. Their efforts, which are primarily motivated by a desire to deflect rising popular anger, have been devoted to promising fire victims small amounts of compensation and scapegoating local authorities for the disaster.

Last Friday, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin signed an order allocating 5 billion rubles (about \$168 million) for the provision of material aid to those who lost their

homes. The government has suggested that it may allocate more funds if necessary. By now, damage from the fire exceeds 6.5 billion rubles. Putin promised 1 million rubles (about \$33,500) to the families of each of those who lost their lives, and 210,000 rubles (about \$7,000) to each person who lost his or her home.

Putin has publicly rebuked various local bureaucrats and governors for their role in the fires, implying that they face the threat of dismissal. For his part, Medvedev fired a number of high-ranking officials in the Russian Navy for failing to prevent a blaze at a naval base in Moscow Oblast.

However, there has been no suggestion from Russian authorities that they may increase funding for fire prevention, a major factor in the present disaster.

In 2007, changes made to Russia's forestry code effectively eliminated the federal government's responsibility for preventing and fighting forest fires. The new code, adopted under pressure from the logging industry, makes the lessees of state-owned forestlands responsible for fire control on those lands. Regional governments are charged with overseeing fire control on lands not under lease.

As early as 2008, these changes led specialists to warn that the next dry summer would be catastrophic. According to Nikolai Shmatkov of the World Wildlife Fund in Russia, small and medium-sized forestland lessees simply cannot afford to build fire roads, helipads, and keep their own fire engines and other firefighting equipment, as the code prescribes. The regional governments, in their turn, have neither the financial resources nor the technical capacity to provide adequate fire protection.

But even prior to this most recent change in the forestry code, the State Forest Protection Service had experienced severe funding cuts, which began in the 1990s. Before then, tens of thousands of rangers patrolled the forests and performed fire prevention work. There was a system of observation points and towers designed to facilitate the identification of fires in their early stages, and there were firefighting teams equipped with both specialized equipment and special training for fighting forest fires. During the hot days of summer, airplanes and helicopters would monitor the forests to ensure timely discovery of fires.

Russia is now witnessing the predictable consequences of the dismantling of that system.

According to an inspection performed before the fires began, out of 270 forest districts in the Moscow area, not a single one was in compliance with fire safety regulations. Various news reports since the forest fires started have noted the complete absence of fire engines in many villages. In several cases, villagers report being "rescued" by firefighters who themselves lack the skills and equipment to effectively save their homes.

One resident of the Moscow suburbs told *Life News* that fire fighters passed by her house, insisting that they must save homes in a nearby, more affluent neighborhood first. They then refused to attempt to put out the blaze that eventually destroyed her and her neighbors' residences, stating their pump had broken.



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