

Record temperatures and forest fires in Russia

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Broad swathes of forest and dried-up bog land have been burning fiercely in large parts of Siberia since the beginning of June. The fires are raging out of control due to the region's decrepit infrastructure. The fires were caused by the hottest summer in Siberia since the beginning of weather records 170 years ago. Temperatures have averaged around 34 degrees Celsius (93 degrees Fahrenheit) for weeks and are expected to remain high in the coming period.

As is the case in the US, Australia and other countries with high levels of agricultural production, the record temperatures in Russia have led to the country's worst harvest since 2010 and triggered a national and international food crisis.

The fires in eastern Russia have affected the districts of Krasnoyarsk, Tuva, Irkutsk, Kurgan, and the Republic of Khakassia. Especially hard hit is the city of Tomsk. According to official figures, around 10,000 hectares of land had been burnt in Tomsk by early August. The city has been covered by heavy smog for weeks and the airport has been out of operation since the beginning of July. More than 300 people have been evacuated from other districts of the country.

As is commonplace with such natural disasters, the Kremlin is mainly preoccupied with covering up the true scale of the fires. According to official figures there are currently 143 fires blazing across 18,000 to 23,000 hectares of land.

The environmental organization Greenpeace, however, estimates that up to 11 million hectares of land have been destroyed by the flames. If this estimate

is correct, then both in terms of area and their ecological effect the current fires would far surpass the forest fires which raged in the summer of 2010. At that time around 1.2 million hectares of land burned in Central Russia, covering the capital city Moscow in a dense smog for weeks.

Unlike 2010, however, the current fires are taking place in scarcely populated regions and the death toll is much lower. Nevertheless, according to official information, at least eight people have been killed by the fires so far this summer.

The ecological consequences are catastrophic. The Siberian taiga is a unique ecosystem that is home to many rare animal species. It is estimated that the burned forests will require 80 to 90 years to recover from the damage. In the Republic of Yakutia, about 60 square kilometres of forest in the Lenskije Stolby Park have been burnt. The park is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The fires are also consuming a region riddled with drained bogs. The overlying layers of peat, consisting of dead plant material stored over millions of years, are now releasing large quantities of CO2 into the atmosphere and accelerating the greenhouse effect.

The main reason that the fires could rage out of control for weeks is the ailing infrastructure in the region and the entire country. Every natural disaster in Russia—big or small—has devastating consequences and often costs many lives due to the decay of infrastructure following the collapse of the Soviet and the subsequent subordination of every aspect of social life to the profit interests of the new rich oligarchs. Just a month ago, at

the beginning of July, hundreds of people lost their lives in the floods that affected the south of the country.

Although the fires in the summer of 2010 had already revealed the extent of the decay of infrastructure and the inadequacies of fire-fighting units, virtually no action was taken to ensure against a repeat of such disasters.

A fire fighter from Krasnoyarsk told the news agency RIA Novosti that since the collapse of the USSR the number of staff at his station has been reduced by a factor of five. In August 2010 there were just 20 men at the station. According to the fire fighter, this figure then doubled to 40, but the new recruits had received little training and were of little use in the current crisis.

The fire fighters also lack ground equipment and water-bombing aircraft. Their pay is so low that almost no one volunteers for the fire department. During the summer months, when fires rage on a regular basis, fire fighters earn 30,000 roubles a month (about €770), the rest of the year just 5,000-6,000 roubles (€130-150). It is practically impossible to feed a family on such a wage.

Residents of the affected regions and experts no longer expect emergency personnel to extinguish the fire and are waiting for harvest rain to finally ease the situation.

The high temperatures and drought have led to severe crop failures in Russia and many other countries. The flooding in the southern Russian region of Krasnodar in early July has additionally exacerbated the effects of bad harvests, cutting off central transport routes. The losses for Russian agricultural producers are already estimated at 32-35 billion roubles (€800-900 million).

The Russian Agriculture Ministry has revised the outlook for this year's grain output down to 70-75 million tonnes. Wheat yields are expected to be an estimated 20 percent lower than last year. These losses are equal to those of 2010. At that time, Russia—one of the major exporters of grain and wheat—introduced a ban on the export of agricultural products. This led to international price increases and famine in many countries in Africa and Asia. Another export ban is now

expected this year.

Eastern European countries such as Estonia and Ukraine are also affected by the heat wave. Some 80 to 90 percent of the winter crops in Estonia will be used for animal feed this year, and the already impoverished country will be forced to import grain.

The crop failures in the United States, Australia, Russia and other agricultural nations in July have driven up the prices for staple foods around the world. Experts expect prices for dairy products, vegetables, bread, meat and other foods will increase in Russia by 5-15 percent by this fall. Even without these expected increases, the prices of basic foodstuffs in Russia are much higher than in Western Europe. This means that pensioners and the poorest strata of the population can seldom afford products such as meat, fruit and vegetables.



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