

Record number of wildfires burn large swaths of Siberia

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A record number of wildfires have burned across Siberia since May, encompassing 16 million hectares of land and marking it as the second-worst fire season since the turn of the century. The wildfires in Russia are larger than all the other large wildfires currently burning in Greece, Turkey, Italy, Canada and the United States, combined.

On Sunday, the Russian government was forced to evacuate two villages as over 155 active forest fires continued to burn in northeastern Siberia's Sakha-Yakutia region.

In addition to the two evacuated villages, 12 other villages were under threat from the fires as an estimated 4,000 firefighters and other workers struggled to contain the ongoing blazes. In many places, local residents have to help fight the flames because of a severe lack of firefighters. The regional capital of Yakutsk was forced to shut down its airport due to the heavy smoke.

Large industrial cities in the Urals, including Yekaterinburg and Chelyabinsk, are covered in thick and toxic smog. In the city of Sarov, in the Nizhny-Novgorod Oblast, a state of emergency was declared this weekend as flames were approaching a national nuclear weapons research center.

It was not until Tuesday that Russian President Vladimir Putin announced some additional federal help and additional firefighters.

Volunteers are attempting to take up the slack where government efforts have failed, but receive little support.

Speaking with the Associated Press (AP), Alexandra Kozulina, an employee of a nongovernmental agency attempting to fight the fires, blamed government inaction for allowing the fires to spin out of control. "I also believe our government should be doing this. I

don't understand why it isn't happening—whether there isn't enough money because budgets were cut, or some other reason, but we are doing what is in our power," she said.

While forest fires are common during the summer months in Siberia, the severity and size of Russian wildfires has increased in recent years due to increasing temperatures and the disappearance of permafrost beneath the soil, which experts have attributed to global warming. Siberia is particularly affected by Arctic temperatures, which are rising more than three times as fast as the rest of the world.

Highlighting the unprecedented nature of this year's wildfires, NASA reported on Saturday that smoke from the fires had reached the north pole, 3,000 kilometres away, "a first in recorded history." According to Greenpeace, since the beginning of the year, more than 62,300 square miles were scorched, almost twice the size of Austria. In last year's wildfires in Russia, an area the size of Great Britain was scorched.

According to the European Union's Copernicus Atmosphere Monitoring Service (CAM), the fires themselves will contribute to further warming as they have already released the equivalent of 505 megatonnes of carbon dioxide since June, already surpassing last year's record total of 450 megatonnes for the entire fire season. There are also fears the fires could further melt Siberia's permafrost and burn peat moss, releasing even more carbon that has long been stored in the ground.

Alexei Yaroshenko, a forestry expert with Greenpeace Russia, told the *Washington Post*, "These forests have a very significant role in regulating the environment. Most of the forests in unprotected areas are in the far north. They grow very slowly, they are very sensitive, and if they burn down, the impact on the

environment is huge.”

The wildfires in Russia are yet another testament to capitalism’s failure to address the climate crisis, which is itself the product of the capitalist system. While rising global temperatures have exacerbated Siberia’s wildfires, the disastrous response by the Russian government to the annually recurring wildfires has been a major contributing factor. The Kremlin allows forest fires to burn uncontrolled if it deems the cost to fight them more expensive than the damage they cause, or if the fires take place in uninhabited areas.

As of this writing, 69 fires are currently being allowed to burn in Russia. They have already scorched 8,000 square miles, and are nearly 10 times bigger than the Dixie wildfire raging in California.

In 2007, the Russian government significantly altered the country’s forest code, disbanding the federal network responsible for spotting forest fires, cutting the number of forest rangers, and turning many aspects of forest management over to regional authorities.

With little federal oversight and huge areas of forest now in the hands of regional authorities, illegal foresting of trees is flourishing. It is widely believed that intentional arson of forests, designed to create new areas for timber, is behind some of the wildfires.

Environmental activists in the country have attributed much of the illegal foresting to the huge demand from nearby China, which has fuelled corruption of government authorities paid to look the other way while timber is illegally harvested for export.

China is the world’s largest importer of lumber. In 2017, China imported nearly 200 million cubic meters of wood from Russia, much of it from Siberia.

Following a public outcry, some of the changes implemented in 2007 were later reversed and the federal agency in charge of monitoring fires was re-established. However, it remains chronically underfunded and understaffed.

According to Konstantin Kobayakov, director of the World Wildlife Fund Russia, in the last 10 years the number of forestry workers has declined from 160,000 to just 22,000 while at the same time the number and severity of fires has increased.

Across the country, this summer only 5,000 firefighters were deployed to fight the country’s widespread fires, which are occurring outside of Siberia as well.

The deliberate underfunding and mismanagement of the country’s forestry workers and firefighters are a direct result of the restoration of capitalism and the destruction of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy three decades ago. While the oligarchy that emerged out of this process has perversely enriched itself, it has overseen a destruction of living standards and social infrastructure unprecedented outside of wartime.

In 2019, Russia, which has a population of 140 million, had approximately 8,500 deaths due to fire. The United States, which also has a decrepit infrastructure and a population of 320 million, recorded 3,704 deaths due to fire despite reporting more than double the number of fires.

In 2018, Russia, which, by territory, is the largest country in the world, had just 5,000 fire stations. By contrast, Poland, a much smaller country with a population of 40 million, had 15,000 fire stations.



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