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The Siberian Times

Forests on fire: 'no attempt will be made to extinguish 219 million hectares of burning trees'

By Olga Gertyk
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A quarter of all Russian forests, 89% of stocks in Sakha Republic, could be left to burn, even though they are essential to fight global warming.



Some 86% of forest in Sakha - also known as Yakutia, and the largest constituent of the Russian Federation - is deemed to fall into the category of 'distant and hard-to-reach territories'.
Picture: Alexander Krivoschapkin

These vast tracts of forest have been labelled 'distant and hard-to-reach territories', and as such it is officially permitted not to extinguish forest fires if they do not constitute a threat to settlements or if a fire fighting operation is extremely expensive.

At the same time, there is official recognition that some regions in Siberia are underreporting the extent of forest fires for 'political reasons', an accusation long made by environmental campaigners.

Some 86% of forest in Sakha - also known as Yakutia, and the largest constituent of the Russian Federation - is deemed to fall into the category of 'distant and hard-to-reach territories', according to reports.



A new decree in Sakha Republic says the emergency services may stop extinguishing fires in hard-to-reach territories if there is no threat to residential areas.
Pictures: Aviarosleskhodz

Some 219 million hectares - or 2.19 million square kilometres, a larger area than either Saudi Arabia or Greenland - is covered by the definition. This amounts to quarter of all forests in Russia, where trees - especially in Siberia - are seen as an essential brake on climate change.

A new decree in Sakha Republic says the emergency services may stop extinguishing fires in such territories if there is no threat to residential areas, or if costs are disproportionate. The move comes as the forest fire season is once more biting across Siberia.

On 26 May, some about 129,000 hectares of forests, mainly in the Republic of Buryatia, and TransBaikal and Amur regions were on fire. Greenpeace Russia believes that officials and regional authorities intentionally announce figures underestimate the scale of forest fires.





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Pictures: Port Amur, V Kontakte

According to the environmental activists, open satellite sources indicated fires covering up to 3 million hectares of forests as of 23 May.

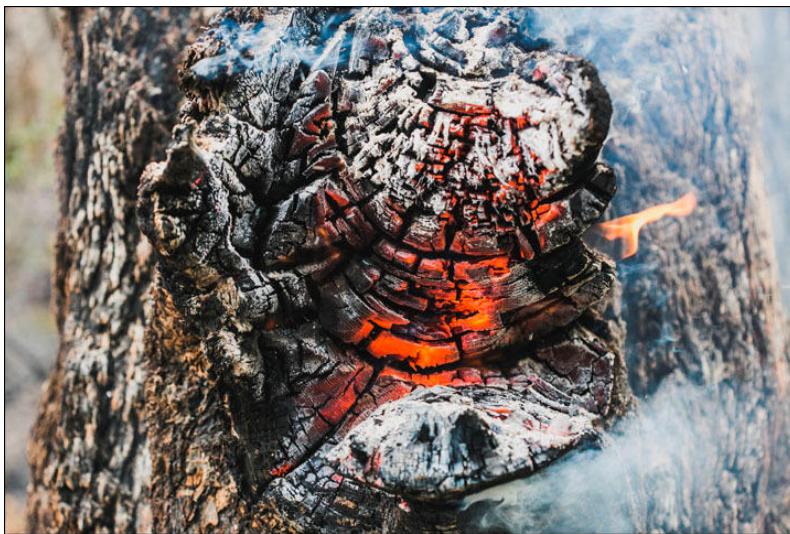
Rosleskhoz - the Federal Agency for Forestry, a federal executive body responsible for oversight of forestry issues - admitted that official figures from regions may be at odds with the actual area of raging fires. Among other reasons this could be 'because of political factors'.

The agency promised to provide correct data about damage at the end of the [fire] season.

Nikolai Krotov, deputy head of Rosleskhoz, said: 'We have concerns about differences in Amur region, Buryatia, Chelyabinsk and Irkutsk regions. We don't rule out that there can be political factors, subjective factors, when information is submitted in a different way.'

Greenpeace has argued for information in real time, not at the end of the season, so fire-fighting resources can be switched between regions to be deployed in most needed areas.





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Pictures: Anton Klimov

Rosleskhoz told Kommersant newspaper that the move by the authorities in Yakutsk is 'not a refusal to extinguish forest fires'.

'It shouldn't be ruled out that the local forestry service will extinguish all the fires because significant part of the republic's population leads a nomadic lifestyle and is always moving around,' said a source.

Mikhail Kreindlin, an expert on specially protected areas at Greenpeace Russia, said other countries sometimes have a rule 'not to extinguish fire of natural origin' but this practice is not always successful because there is always a risk that the heart of the blaze may grow bigger.

He pointed to massive forest fires in Canada which resulted in the evacuation of up to 80,000 people in recent weeks. Greenpeace Russia also warned that failing to tackle forest fires can destroy rare animals.