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Video: Greenpeace Russia

# The World's Largest Forest Has Been on Fire for Months

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In July, Alexander Uss, governor of the vast Siberian region of Krasnoyarsk, said it was simply “pointless and maybe even harmful” to attempt to fight the wildfires that cloaked his capital city in a toxic cloud of smoke.

Days later, President Vladimir Putin sent in the army and even Donald Trump took notice, offering his Russian counterpart U.S. help to battle the blazes. Governor Uss has since reversed his position, and is joining the fight against what Greenpeace Russia says are on track to be the worst Siberian forest fires on record.

Temperatures in June and July were the hottest ever charted globally, with parts of Siberia where the fires are concentrated reaching 10 degrees Fahrenheit (6 degrees Celsius) above the 30-year average from 1981 to 2010. The resulting dry conditions fed fires that torched more than 7 million hectares (17 million acres) of Siberian wilderness in just two months. Since the beginning of the year, fires have consumed more than 13 million hectares—an area larger than Greece.

### Russia's 2019 Fire Season

Daily active fires recorded

● May ● June ● July ● August



Source: NASA Earth Data Fire Information for Resource Management System

“I don’t remember a situation where the fires burned this long, and I’ve been in forest management since 1972,” said Pyotr Tsvetkov, who runs the forest fire lab at the Sukachev Forest Institute in Krasnoyarsk. “There aren’t many fires, but they are over a huge territory and the smoke covers hundreds of kilometers. There’s no air to breathe in Krasnoyarsk and the smoke has made it to the Urals.”



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government wouldn't try to control emigrations.

Smoke hangs over Krasnoyarsk's Yenisey River. Source: Greenpeace Russia

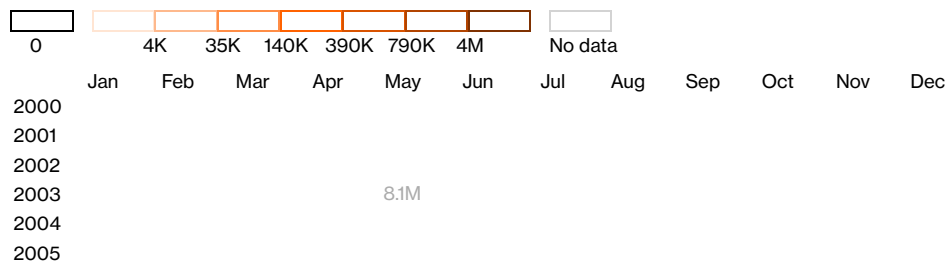
Before the military promised manpower and equipment, the state's aerial forest protection agency was vastly outgunned. With just 3,000 firefighters and 24 aircraft, it mobilized to extinguish less than 4% of the forest fires.

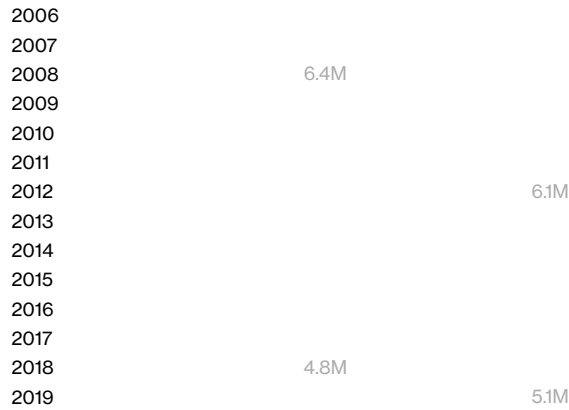
Russia has now declared a state of emergency in the Krasnoyarsk and Irkutsk regions—covering an area larger than India—as well as parts of two others. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev ordered a raft of measures to revise how the country protects its forests.

“It's crucial in the fight against fires that they provide enough money,” Grigory Kuksin, the head of Greenpeace Russia's fire department, said in a statement. “Only then can Russia protect against catastrophic fires next year.”

### July Was the Worst Month Since 2012 🔍

Burnt area in hectares from wildland fires in Russia





Source: Federal Forestry Agency's Remote Monitoring Information System (ISDM-Rosleskhoz) via Greenpeace Russia

Many residents lack faith in the government's ability to intervene successfully. Andrei Grigoriev, who edits the I Love Krasnoyarsk Facebook community, said the apathy of local officials before the Kremlin took notice was telling.

"I had to stop my morning runs, because I didn't want to smell the burning taiga," Grigoriev, 55, said. "Yet the governor calmly justified not fighting these massive forest fires in his native land by saying they're far off and even beneficial. Then the world noticed and Moscow woke up, and now Governor Uss says he wants to put the fires out."

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Uss has argued that relying on rain to extinguish remote fires is standard practice internationally. This week, he declared a "breakthrough" in fighting the blazes and noted that they didn't burn down any settlements in his region. Even so, over 900,000 hectares in Krasnoyarsk continue to burn. These unchecked fires are destroying millions of hectares of trees in the world's largest forest, a critical carbon sink, and could further accelerate global warming.

"As carbon builds in the atmosphere, the energy needs to be released and that results in more extreme weather," said Oksana Tarasova, head of the World Meteorological Organization's Atmospheric Research and Environment Department in Geneva. "The biomass burning in Siberia is part of this pattern."

**Burning in the Atmosphere**

Carbon monoxide concentration, July 18 to August 5

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Source: NASA Global Modeling and Assimilation Office

Russia is finally waking up to the threat of climate change, which Putin in 2017 joked could be beneficial for Russia given its reputation for cold weather. The Economy Ministry is drafting a plan for adapting the economy to increasing climate-related events such as forest fires.

For now, Krasnoyarsk's best hope of assistance might not come from the military or the U.S. (whose help Putin declined), but the weather.

"We're waiting for rain," said Tsvetkov, from the fire institute. "Fires this powerful won't be extinguished by even a strong downpour, they need rainy weather, but that's not in the forecast."

*(Correction: An earlier version of this article misnamed the Yenisei River.)*

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