

Urgent measures to stop Siberian forest fires

The world's largest forest—the Siberian Taiga in Russia—has been on fire for most of 2019. Since January this year, more than 130,000 square km of land and forest—an area the size of Greece—has been burned in Siberia, having detrimental effects on the lives and livelihood of the indigenous peoples who depend on the forest and have traditionally protected it. Before public pressure by indigenous peoples and others was put on the Russian government in August, understaffed and underequipped firefighters were able to only put out 4% of the fires.

Taiga biomes cover 33% of the planet and store 50% of the world's soil carbon. This huge amount of carbon is stored in permafrost and thus decomposes at a slower rate, however as the Taiga burns, the permafrost melts and more carbon is released into the atmosphere. Additionally, soot from the fires falls back down to the ground and embeds into ice and snow, what accelerates melting. It isn't just that trees are burning; the land underneath is burning as well. Peatland fires are particularly difficult to extinguish as flameless combustion slowly spreads across the forest floor, burning up moss and leaf biomass; a process that can continue in winter.

The Evenki people—who are spread out through eastern parts of Russia, as well as in China and Mongolia—inhabit a territory called Evenkia in the Krasnoyarsk region, a vast 2.3 million square km area that stretches from north to south in the middle of Russia. According to official information, as of 8 August 17,000 square km of forest land in Evenkia have been burned, but indigenous inhabitants fear the extent of the damage is bigger. According to local reports, in three traditional hunting areas alone between 33 and 90% of the forests have been burned, leaving indigenous communities little place to hunt for their subsistence, while the state support system doesn't include any help for such types of crises.

Evenkia has an extremely low population density— only two dozen permanent settlements in an area larger than France. Indigenous population represents the majority, and is faced with growing social inequality exacerbated by the loss of forest and land to fires and large extractive industries, such as logging companies, many of which operate to satisfy large Chinese demands for timber. In recent decade forests in Evenkia have been stripped of their protected status, which swung the door open for investment projects, mainly through logging companies. They are not even required to do environmental impact assessments on the effect of logging on permafrost. Apart from the serious environmental impact on indigenous livelihoods, logging companies contributed greatly to the spread of forest fires in Siberia by leaving highly flammable waste. Observers are suggesting that at least some of the fires were deliberately started to cover non-compliance with legal requirements on logging and clean-up of the logged land plots. Additionally, logging companies lease the same land plots that indigenous communities are forced to rent—allowing the government to draw double fees.

Deforestation in Siberia, half of which includes Krasnoyarsk region, has led to the rapid desiccation of wetlands thus having major damaging effects to the water balance of the area. Increasingly hot and dry season largely contributed to shallowing of the Lena River, one of the longest rivers in the world. Local media reported that the river level dropped a staggering 2.5 metres, affecting not just reindeer herds and other animals, but the people in the river basin dependent on it as a source of fish and as a means of transportation. Major settlements in Evenkia were covered in smoke and smog for two months over the summer and people complained of difficulty to breathe. Other remote regions, such as Krasnoyarsk, Novosibirsk, Tomsk, Buryatia, Yakutia and Khakassia, have also suffered air pollution.

Indigenous communities have been campaigning to attract the attention of politicians and wide public to these problems by posting photos and information on social media, appealing to local and federal authorities. Following public pressure, the Russian Parliament has been tasked with investigating the legal order that limits government intervention in forest fires instead of organizing the large scale observations and protection measures to address the root causes that allow these fires to begin and continue.

In September, representatives of the Congress of indigenous peoples in Krasnoyarsk region have sent a collective Statement to Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, appealing to him to put a ban to the massive export of timber—estimated at 22 million cubic metres —from indigenous

lands in Russia at the expense of fragile habitats and traditional livelihoods that will soon be irreparably lost. The relevant petition is published in Russian and English at the platform:

<https://www.change.org/p/генеральный-секретарь-цк-кпк-си-цзиньпин-президент-россии-в-в-путин-защита-исконной-среды-обитания-коренных-малочисленных-народов>

Additional information at:

<https://www.iwgia.org/en/russia/3516-siberian-fires-having-catastrophic-effects-on-indigenous-peoples-and-livelihoods>