

Russians rally to save Lake Baikal

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Supporters of the Greenpeace organization hold a rally in defence of Lake Baikal in St. Petersburg. Russians on Saturday protested at the reopening of a paper mill on the shore of Lake Baikal which environmentalists say endangers one of the world's largest freshwater reserves.

Russians on Saturday protested at the reopening of a paper mill on the shore of Lake Baikal which environmentalists say endangers one of the world's largest freshwater reserves.

Nearly 200 people turned out in central Saint Petersburg, Russia's former imperial capital, as environmental organisations including Greenpeace warned of turning the scenic Siberian lake into a sewer.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in January gave the go-ahead for the reopening of the Baikalsk Pulp and Paper Mill which has been shut since 2008 and is owned by billionaire oligarch Oleg Deripaska.

Demonstrators were planning to send a collection of toilet paper to Putin whose decision they argue would lead to discharging tonnes of sewage into the lake and incinerating waste on the lakefront.

"If authorities are in dire need of paper and need to destroy the Baikal, we're giving them paper," said Dmitry Artamonov, the local [Greenpeace](#) chief.

Lake Baikal, the world's deepest freshwater lake and a UN [World Heritage site](#), is renowned for its unique flora and fauna and contains about 20 percent of the planet's freshwater reserves.

"The attitude toward the Baikal shows the pervasive ecological arbitrariness in the country," said 37-year-old demonstrator Yevgeny Kozlov.

WWF Russia representative Yevgeny Schwartz has warned that reopening the mill is dangerous "because they are going to resume the production of white cellulose with chlorine", which is a toxic gas.

About 100 people rallied in a similar protest in the eastern Siberian city of Ulan-Ude, Russian news agencies reported.

Nearly 700 people turned out to back Putin's decision in the town of Baikalsk where the mill is located.

Agencies said the plant employs about 1,600 people.

An official said in late January that the factory's closed water circulation system, built to avoid pollution to the lake, had not been put back into service.

The high cost of operating the system had led to the plant's closure in

2008.

Critics say the reopening of the mill also is an obstacle to the development of alternative economic activities for the region, mainly in tourism and ecology.

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