

'Our homeland is burning': Volunteers join Siberia wildfire fight

July 30 2021, by Evan Gershkovich



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The father and son stood in the forest burning around them, the elder with a shovel in hand, the younger with a plastic bottle filled with

gasoline.

As the son poured the fuel onto the [forest floor](#), watching as the rising flames rendered white birch trunks black, his father shovelled dirt onto embers that popped across the other side of a trench marked for a controlled burn.

Ivan Fyodorov, 65, and his 42-year-old son Pyotr were helping firefighters on an afternoon in late July to prevent a wildfire from reaching their land in the Siberian region of Yakutia.

While large wildfires are an annual occurrence in Siberia, the blazes have hit Yakutia with an increasingly ferocious intensity the past three years, scorching its legendary vast northern forests known as the taiga.

With firefighters and [emergency services](#) struggling, hundreds of volunteers have joined the efforts to contain the blazes, which experts have linked to [climate change](#).

Fyodorov said the first fire had come close to his farmland around the village of Byas-Kyuel in June, but they were able to beat it back.

Then came the second. Then the third.

"At that point we didn't have the strength. It's good these guys came," he said of the dozen firefighters working nearby.



"I've lived my whole life in the taiga. I'm dependent on nature," 65-year-old Ivan Fyodorov says as he helps fight a fire near his land. "We have to protect it."

Citing government inaction, Fyodorov said that he and his family have taken the fight into their own hands.

Pyotr had been helping him for 17 days straight, while his other three sons and daughter travelled four hours by car from the regional capital Yakutsk at the beginning of July to do their part.

"We haven't been able to cut our hay yet because we've been busy fighting the fires," Fyodorov said.

Asked what he would do if the fires keep intensifying in the coming

years, he said: "I'll fight the fires, what else can I do."

"I've lived my whole life in the taiga. I'm dependent on nature," he added. "We have to protect it."

'Nothing to breathe'

The fires have not only affected the taiga.

For days in July Yakutsk was covered in a smog that monitors called one of the world's worst-ever air pollution events.



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In the city of some 300,000 people on a late July weekend evening, volunteers were preparing to leave in a convoy for the Gorniy district, which is home to Byas-Kyuel and where some of the most intense fires had raged that month.

Some three dozen members of a local athletics club gathered around a dummy on the floor in a volunteer centre where two emergencies ministry officials conducted a rapid rescue training session.

"Our job is to get you ready as quickly as possible," one yelled out to the group.

The men, eager to get moving, half-listened as they shuffled back and forth.

"When our homeland is burning, we can't stand on the sidelines," said the club's 50-year-old head, Turgun Popov.

He told AFP that their goal was not to put out the [fire](#) on their own, but to give professionals "the chance to rest for a couple of hours or a couple of days because they have been putting out the fires for months."



For days in July, the Siberian city of Yakutsk was covered in a smog that monitors called one of the world's worst-ever air pollution events.

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