

Medvedev Eyes Forest Code Reform

September 08, 2010

The  **Moscow Times**

Russia's catastrophic wildfires this summer have demonstrated the need to reform the nation's forest protection legislation and the state forestry agency, President Dmitry Medvedev said Wednesday.

The remarks appeared to reflect Medvedev's desire to take a higher profile on economic and domestic policy issues presently controlled by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin — though Medvedev stopped short of an open challenge to his powerful predecessor and mentor.

Medvedev indicated that Putin's move to take direct control of the Federal Forestry Agency could be insufficient to properly protect the nation's forests in the future.

"If it's more convenient to work that way, you are welcome," Medvedev told a government meeting focused on forests. "But if it proves insufficient, I reserve the right to radically change those structures."

He said the blazes had shown that the current law and the existing official structures cannot properly protect the forests.

"It's quite obvious that the legal base and the organizational structure that we have don't fit the purpose," Medvedev said in televised remarks.

The president also said the need for changing the current forest legislation also must be carefully analyzed.

On Tuesday, some State Duma deputies criticized the government and the Putin-led United Russia party for pushing through the 2007 Forest Code that dismantled a sprawling Soviet-era network of forest protection.

The legislators' statements echoed criticism from some environmental protection groups and Kremlin political foes who held Putin personally responsible for passing the forest law.

Medvedev avoided any direct criticism of Putin, but said the law had left most of the nation's forests without due oversight.

The hottest summer since records began 130 years ago and an accompanying drought sparked tens of thousands of fires in Russia. More than 50 people died directly in the fires, and about 2,500 residences across Russia were destroyed.

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