

Forest Fires Rage in Far East, Siberia

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Fires are spreading fast across vast Siberian forests in a reminder of last year's worst drought on record which killed dozens of people and forced the country to suspend grain exports.

The Emergency Situations Ministry said Sunday on its web site that about 100,000 hectares of forestland was caught up in fires, mainly in the Far East as well as in the oil-rich Siberian region of Khanty-Mansiisk and nearby areas.

The European part of the country, its agricultural hinterland, remained largely unaffected, but the authorities said the situation may worsen as dry weather persists.

During a record heatwave last summer, authorities struggled to contain peat and forest fires that destroyed a quarter of the country's crops, killed dozens of people and engulfed Moscow in a cloud of hazardous acrid smoke.

Hundreds are thought to have died from the scorching heat last year, but the country's top weather forecaster has said he did not expect the extreme drought to be repeated this year.

Last month President Dmitry Medvedev ordered officials to prevent a repeat of last year's

devastating wildfires as environmentalists warned of another disaster.

Estimates for the European Union's wheat harvest are shrinking by the day, with analysts cutting crop forecasts again last week as plants wilted in a months-long drought that looks set to continue for a while.

Russia's official forecast for this year's crop is 85 million to 90 million tons, compared with some 61 million tons in 2010, 97 million in 2009 and 108 million in 2008.

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