

# Ecologists Link Far East Floods to Global Warming

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Putin looking at partially submerged homes in a flooded area of the Amur region from a helicopter on Thursday. **Alexei Nikolsky**

When President Vladimir Putin flew to the Khabarovsk region on Thursday to survey the damage from the record flooding in the area, ecologists said he came face-to-face not only with the stubbornly rising waters, but with his own doubts about global warming.

Some ecologists say that global warming is the cause of the record flooding in the Far East and cautioned that more areas in Russia are at risk of severe weather changes in the future as the problem escalates.

High-level officials, including those from the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry, met late Thursday in the Khabarovsk Region to discuss the impact of the flood, but given the scope of solutions that were presented earlier this week, ecologists are not expecting any changes to the government's policies, which they said favor business over environment.

"I'm not going to read letters and telegrams that are coming from citizens in my address. We'll discuss those at a separate meeting," Putin said Thursday. "But I want to turn your attention to the fact that not everything is as smooth as we'd like to think."

The Amur region is so far the most affected by the floods, but the emergency regime is currently also in place in the republic of Sakha and the Khabarovsk and Primorye regions, as well as the Jewish autonomous region.

Record amounts of rain fell in the Amur region during July and August, surpassing the annual average and creating the worst flood situation in more than a century. Water levels in the Amur River near Khabarovsk rose a further 15 centimeters Thursday and reached 7.56 meters, according to statistics from the state-run weather center. The highest levels previously recorded were just more than 6 meters.

The current situation is expected to get worse as heavy rains continue to pummel the region at least until the start of next week, according to a forecast that the weather center released Wednesday. Local meteorologists predict that floodwaters could reach 9 meters before the levels start to fall — not earlier than the middle of September.

Preliminary estimates for damage caused by the floods in the Khabarovsk region are 4.7 billion rubles (\$141 million), the region's acting governor, Vyacheslav Shport, said Thursday, RIA Novosti reported. This figure could increase to 7 billion rubles as the situation worsens.

The number of people who have suffered from the floods in the Far East surpassed 50,000 people. The severity of the situation has led Putin to consider postponing the area's elections, currently scheduled for Sept. 8.

## **Global Warming Debates**

Some experts are linking the record-setting crisis to global warming. Increased carbon dioxide emissions have altered heat exchange processes between the atmosphere and space, leading to a change in the frequency and intensity of precipitation, said Vladimir Chuprov, head of the energy program at Greenpeace Russia.

Meteorologists from the state-run weather center do not rule out that global warming could be at the root of the problem.

"It is quite possible that such showers are indeed consequences of global warming. How else to explain this constant change in the climate?" Svetlana Ageyeva, head of the meteorological center in the Khabarovsk region, told RIA Novosti. "I would not laugh at those who say such things."

Over the next years, Russians will see how global warming is causing large droughts in southern Russia, particularly the Krasnodar, Voronezh and Saratov regions, Chuprov said. For the taiga forests in the European part of the country, the phenomenon would manifest itself in a greater number of fires and insects.

What makes these problems more worrisome is that ever changing climate patterns would make them increasingly difficult to predict. For example, farmers in the Central Federal

District told Chuprov that ever since the record drought of 2010, they could no longer use natural signs, such as how much snow has fallen in December and how clear the skies are, to predict summer weather.

But others are hesitant to make such broad conclusions. Alexander Nakhutin, deputy director of the Moscow-based Institute of Global Climate and Ecology, said that it was too early to draw a direct correlation between the record rainfall in the Far East and global warming.

"The circulation of air and precipitation patterns are changing. This could have an indirect link, but given the current scientific findings, we can't assert that it is global warming," Nakhutin said.

The summer in the Far East began with anomalous conditions. The spring was wetter than usual, and there was initially a higher level of water in the rivers, later made worse by the heavy rains.

### **Business Over Ecology**

Whatever the cause behind the record flooding in the area, scientists said years of research was necessary to determine the role of global warming.

Far East Development Minister Viktor Ishayev said one of the preventive measures against future floods must be to improve long-term scientific forecasts for floods, including their links to climate change.

However, practice shows that in Russia natural disasters do not serve as an impulse for greater state investment into science, Nakhutin said. The government is more likely to focus all attention on dealing with the crisis rather than investigate its causes, so any indirect support that does go to scientists is not significant, he added.

Chuprov said that while the state-run weather center had made progress by starting to speak out about global warming, it is a neutral body and has no political weight.

"The weather center is in a trap. It sees that things are not right and that its theories [as to the causes] have merit, but its findings are [in conflict with] the oil and gas industry," Chuprov said. "Even if there are 10 more floods, the situation will not change. On one side of the scale there are ordinary people and on the other, multi-million dollars worth of business."

Senior officials use natural disasters to their advantage by arguing that they are reasons to pump more money into state-owned or state-controlled enterprises, Chuprov added.

Existing hydropower plants helped to lessen the damage from the floods in the Far East, said Yevgeny Dod, head of the partially government-owned RusHydro, this week at a meeting that included the region's governor and the management of the electric power group RAO Energy Systems Vostok.

Dod added that large portions of the Amur River are still unregulated, which leads to periodic catastrophic floods, and that new hydropower plants must be built to prevent future floods, Amurskaya Pravda reported.

Two hydropower stations are now under construction in the Amur region, and another four are being designed, though ecologists said such projects were detrimental to the environment.

"Authorities are unlikely to admit that global warming is part of the problem until an economic crisis makes it necessary for them to reverse the country's environmental practices," Chuprov said.

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