

Russians face air quality citation for smoky chimney after told to shut down consulate



Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

On a day that saw temperatures top 95 in San Francisco, staff at the Russian consulate said the staff were burning “unidentified items” in the consulate’s fireplace.

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SAN FRANCISCO — Acrid, black smoke was seen pouring from a chimney at the Russian consulate in San Francisco Friday, a day after the Trump administration ordered its closure amid escalating tensions between the United States and Russia.

Firefighters who arrived at the scene were turned away by consulate officials who came from inside the building. Bay Area Air Quality Management District investigators, probing the heavy black smoke on a Spare the Air day where such dark particulate matter is banned, have also been denied access to the property, said board member John Gioia.

“They are out there now. They don’t know what is burning and they have not been let in,” Gioia said. “Investigators have asked to enter the premises.”

On summer Spare the Air Days, like Friday with temperatures in the 100s in San Francisco, residents may not burn anything producing more hazardous dark smoke, Gioia said. During winter, the ban is on using wood fireplaces.

“During the summer it’s an opacity issue. It deals with the gray scale of the smoke,” Gioia said. “Most likely we’ll issue a citation.”

And despite any remaining diplomatic ties, Gioia said the consulate is subject to fines from his regulatory agency.

“This consulate is closing Saturday, for all we know they may be burning documents or something else,” he said.

Added to the backdrop of allegations of Russian meddling in the election and the ongoing probe, Gioia said Friday’s chimney smoke only “adds fuel to the fire.”

“We already know the Russians messed with our election, now they are messing with our air quality,” the Contra Costa supervisor said.

An Associated Press reporter heard people who came from inside the building tell firefighters that there was no problem and that consulate staff were burning unidentified items in a fireplace.

Mindy Talamadge, a spokeswoman from the San Francisco Fire Department, said the department received a call about the smoke and sent a crew to investigate but determined the smoke was coming from the chimney.

“They had a fire going in their fireplace,” she said.

Talmadge said she did not know what they were burning on a day when normally cool San Francisco temperatures had already climbed to 95 degrees by noon.

“It was not unintentional. They were burning something in their fireplace,” she said.

Firefighters can enter a building if there’s a suspicion of a fire, even if not invited, but not under any circumstance, said Janet Upton with the state fire marshal’s office.

“In the case of smoke coming from a chimney, that’s not enough to warrant us entering for an emergent fire,” Upton said. Had the smoke come from the eaves or elsewhere, that could have changed firefighter response, she said.

The consulate’s workers are hurrying to shut Russia’s oldest consulate in the U.S.

The order for Russia to vacate the consulate and an official diplomatic residence in San Francisco — home to a longstanding community of Russian emigres and technology workers — escalated an already tense diplomatic standoff between Washington and Moscow.

The deadline for the consulate to close is Saturday. The Associated Press contributed to this report.