

Forest fires blight Europe amid drought fears

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In parts of Germany, farmers' fields resemble desert landscapes

Weather experts warn of drought in Europe over its summer as firefighters tackled forest fires on Thursday, and farmers fretted over wilting crops and a repeat of 2018's arid conditions.

In Germany, Europe's biggest economy, farmers are fearful at the start of the growing season following below-[average rainfall](#) earlier this year—bad news after last year's [drought](#).

Unless significant rain falls in May, experts say there is little chance of decent crops.

"If the [dry weather](#) continues in the coming months, the drought of 2018 could be repeated or even exceeded," warned Udo Busch, head of the German weather service's agricultural section.

A lack of rain has turned some forests into potential tinderboxes.

Over the past few days, German firefighters have tackled blazing forest fires in the states of Hessen, Brandenburg and Thuringia.

A senior fire chief has even asked authorities, including the army, to lend helicopters in order to "react adequately".

Scandinavia has also been hit, with Swedish firefighters currently tackling 10 to 15 [forest fires](#) a day after precious little rain this month.

The most serious blaze broke out over 300 hectares (740 acres) in the southern district of Hassleholm, forcing 49 people to be evacuated.

'Decisive month is May'

Last year nearly 25,000 hectares of land was ravaged by fires in Sweden.



In Sweden, tractors hauling fertilizer tanks filled with water are used to put out a forest fire

In neighbouring Norway, a forest fire narrowly missed the community of Sokndal, but around 70 firefighters were still extinguishing flames on Thursday over an area of 750 hectares.

Dry conditions are a headache for northern Europe's farmers.

Phil Hogan, the European Union's agriculture commissioner, on Thursday promised farmers and rural communities in member states will get EU support should drought strike again.

In the German state of Brandenburg, surrounding Berlin, barren fields resemble desert landscapes.

There are fears of a repeat of last year's poor harvest, when crops were down between 30 to 80 percent, threatening the livelihoods of many German farmers.

Across Brandenburg's 780 farms, reported losses for 2018 topped 93 million euros (\$104 million) and the state had to provide 72 million euros in aid.

Rain is forecast for the coming days. But it is expected to be far insufficient for what is needed to mitigate a worrying situation.

"We sincerely hope for rain—the decisive month for us is May," said farmers' association spokesman Tino Erstling.

In neighbouring Austria, the first signs of drought have already appeared in the east and north, raising fears of another bleak harvest.

Rainfall is already down to just a quarter of the 10-year average in recent weeks.



Northern Italy, too, has been affected by lack of rain over Europe's winter months

'Signs point to suffering'

Potato growers are demanding a relaxation of pesticide regulations to better control numbers of wireworm, which they say are flourishing because of drought.

"The current signs point to suffering for agriculture," said Hagelversicherung, a specialist insurance company.

The situation is even more shocking in the Czech Republic, where 99 percent of the country has already been hit by drought over the last five

weeks.

A third of the country is classed among the worst two drought categories on a six-level scale, according to the Intersucho (Interdrought) portal, which monitors drought in central Europe.

The drought has come a month earlier than last year.

In many Czech villages, the wells are already dry, forcing the population to find other ways to get water.

Forecasters predict rain this weekend which may help save some crops, but farmers remain sceptical.

Hardest hit will be the regions northwest of Prague, where hops crucial to the Czech beer industry are grown, and in the southeast, famous for its wine and grain.

A couple of windy days over the past weeks haven't helped as the wind has dried the top layer of soil.

The drought is also devastating Czech forests as it encourages breeding of the bark beetle with damage this year projected to top one billion euros.

The Czech Republic has been grappling with bark beetle infestation for several years and experts say the current situation is the worst in Czech history.

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