

Italy swelters as Spain, Portugal brace for coming heat wave

August 11 2021, by Barry Hatton



A volunteer helps controlling fire in Fuscaldo, near Cosenza, Calabria, Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 11, 2021, as many wildfires continue plaguing the southern regions of Italy. Sicily, Sardinia, Calabria and also central Italy, where temperatures are expected to reach record high, were badly hit by wildfires. Climate scientists say there is little doubt that climate change from the burning of coal, oil and natural gas is driving extreme events, such as heat waves, droughts, wildfires, floods and storms. Credit: Luigi Salsini/LaPresse via AP

Italy baked in sweltering temperatures that continued to drive deadly wildfires Wednesday, with Spain and Portugal bracing for the arrival of a dangerous heat wave that has grilled southeastern Europe and is starting to push west toward the Iberian peninsula.

A heat wave fed by hot air from North Africa has engulfed large parts of the Mediterranean region in recent days, contributing to massive wildfires and killing dozens of people in Italy, Turkey and Algeria. In Greece, huge wildfires have ravaged forests for a week, destroying homes and forcing evacuations.

Sicily recorded Wednesday what may be a new European [temperature](#) record, though weather experts cautioned that the measurement still must be confirmed.

The Sicily region's agriculture-meteorological information service, SIAS, reported that a temperature of 48.8 degrees Celsius (119.84 degrees Fahrenheit) was reached at the island's Syracuse station. The agency said on its Facebook page it is the highest temperature registered in the entire network since its installation in 2002.

The highest temperature ever recorded on the European continent is 48 degrees Celsius (118.40 degrees Fahrenheit) in 1977 in Athens.

The Sicily temperature could not be independently confirmed, however, and Italy's air force meteorological service said it had not recorded temperatures approaching that high on Wednesday but that its stations are in other locations so variations are to be expected.



A man and his dog refresh in a fountain of Catania, Sicily, Southern Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 11, 2021 where the temperature reached 45 degrees Celsius (113 degrees Fahrenheit). The ongoing heatwave will last up until the weekend with temperatures expected to reach over 40 degrees Celsius in many parts of Italy. Credit: AP Photo/Salvatore Cavalli

The World Meteorological Organization said it would examine the reading but Randy Cervený, the agency's rapporteur for [weather records](#), called it "suspicious, so we're not going to make any immediate determination."

"It doesn't sound terribly plausible," Cervený said. "But we're not going to dismiss it."

WMO spokeswoman Sylvie Castonguay counseled caution: "Extreme weather and [climate events](#) are often sensationalized and mischaracterized as 'records' before they have been thoroughly investigated and properly validated."

However, the high-pressure system of near-record strength currently centered over the Mediterranean is the type that can produce unprecedented heat somewhere, meteorologist Jeff Masters of Yale Climate Connections said.

North Africa is also flirting with all-time high temperatures, he said.



People refresh in the sea in Palermo, Sicily, Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 11, 2021. The ongoing heatwave will last up until the weekend with temperatures expected to reach well over 40 degrees Celsius in many parts of Italy. Credit: Alberto Lo

Bianco/LaPresse via AP

Spain and Portugal could see what was heading their way, as temperatures on the Iberian peninsula were forecast to start building from Thursday.

Portugal's [prime minister](#) warned that the hot weather increases the threat of wildfires, which in 2017 killed more than 100 people in his country.

Spain's weather service forecast a heat wave through Monday and said temperatures could surpass 44 degrees Celsius (111 degrees Fahrenheit) in some areas.

"The maximum and minimum temperatures will reach levels far above the normal for this time of the year," Spain's weather service, AEMET, said in a "special weather warning."

Such peaks of temperature are not unheard of in Spain and Portugal during the summer months. Even so, climate scientists say there is little doubt climate change from the burning of coal, oil and natural gas is driving extreme events, such as heat waves, droughts, wildfires, floods and storms.



A woman sits near a fountain in a street of Catania, Sicily, Southern Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 11, 2021 where the temperature reached 45 degrees Celsius (113 degrees Fahrenheit). The ongoing heatwave will last up until the weekend with temperatures expected to reach over 40 degrees Celsius in many parts of Italy. Credit: AP Photo/Salvatore Cavalli

Researchers can directly link a single event to climate change only through intensive data analysis, but they say such calamities are expected to happen more frequently on our warming planet.

Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa urged people to take special care amid the scorching weather and wildfire danger, adding that many wildfires start with careless behavior.

Costa said "the terrible images" from Greece and Turkey in recent days brought back Portuguese memories of 2017.

"We don't want to see that scenario here again," Costa said in a videotaped message at his official residence.

Portuguese authorities say they can deploy more than 12,000 firefighters, some 2,700 vehicles and 60 aircraft during the summer season.

Costa said that over the past three years Portugal has reduced by half the number of wildfires compared with the average of the previous 10 years and cut the charred area by 64%.



Firefighters controlling a fire in Fuscaldo, near Cosenza, Calabria, Italy, Wednesday, Aug. 11, 2021, as many wildfires continue plaguing the southern regions of Italy. Sicily, Sardinia, Calabria and also central Italy, where temperatures are expected to reach record high, were badly hit by wildfires. Climate scientists say there is little doubt that climate change from the burning of coal, oil and natural gas is driving extreme events, such as heat waves, droughts, wildfires, floods and storms. Credit: Luigi Salsini/LaPresse via AP



A man looks at a forest fire near the village of Larbaa Nath Irathen, near Tizi Ouzou, in the mountainous Kabyle region, 100 kilometers (60 miles) east of Algeria's capital of Algiers, Wednesday, Aug. 11, 2021. At least 25 soldiers died saving residents from wildfires ravaging mountain forests and villages east of Algeria's capital, the president announced Tuesday night as the civilian toll rose to at least 17. Credit: AP Photo/Fateh Guidoum

Authorities enacted a broad range of measures after 2017. They included better forest management, including woodland clearance projects and technical support for people living in rural areas, opening thousands of kilometers (miles) of firebreaks and reacting more rapidly to outbreaks with special firefighting units.

Nobody has died in forest blazes in Portugal since 2017.

In Spain, the hot weather was widely blamed for a record high in domestic energy prices, as the use of air-conditioning units climbed and wind turbines stood still in balmy [weather](#). Other factors, such as rising prices for [natural gas](#) and for carbon credits under the European Union's emissions trading scheme, were also behind the increase.

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