

Europe wildfire risk heightened by early heat waves, drought

June 22 2022, by Ciarán Giles and Derek Gatopoulos



A firefighter works in front of flames during a wildfire in the Sierra de la Culebra in the Zamora Province on Saturday June 18, 2022. Spain is breathing a sigh of relief as a sharp drop in temperatures is helping firefighters contain wildfires across the country that destroyed tens of thousands of acres of wooded land. But it's still only June. Extended drought conditions in several Mediterranean countries, a heat wave last week that reached northern Germany and high fuel costs needed to operate firefighting aircraft have already heightened concerns across Europe this summer. Credit: Emilio Fraile/Europa

Press via AP

Extended drought conditions in several Mediterranean countries, a heat wave last week that reached [northern Germany](#) and high fuel costs for aircraft needed to fight wildfires have heightened concerns across Europe this summer.

And it's only June.

"Much of the continent is in drought," said Cathelijne Stoof, an environmental science professor at the Netherlands' Wageningen University, who called the wildfire outlook "very challenging across Europe."

Fires last summer blackened more than 11,000 square kilometers (4,250 square miles) of land—an area more than four times the size of Luxembourg. About half of the damage was in the European Union.

And, experts say, Europe's wildfires aren't just a problem for the southern, hotter countries.

"What scientists are warning us is that (fires) are obviously going north and in countries such as the U.K., in countries such as Germany as well as in Scandinavian countries, in the future, we need to expect wildfires to happen more often," said Catherine Gamper, a climate change adaptation specialist at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Wildfires across Spain have destroyed tens of thousands of acres of wooded land, though a recent [sharp drop in temperatures](#) is helping firefighters contain them.



A view of the burned landscape after forest fires affected the area near to Miranda de Arga, northern Spain, Thursday, June 16, 2022. Spain is breathing a sigh of relief as a sharp drop in temperatures is helping firefighters contain wildfires across the country that destroyed tens of thousands of acres of wooded land. But it's still only June. Extended drought conditions in several Mediterranean countries, a heat wave last week that reached northern Germany and high fuel costs needed to operate firefighting aircraft have already heightened concerns across Europe this summer. Credit: AP Photo/Alvaro Barrientos, File

Spain's problems began with the arrival in spring of the earliest heat wave in two decades. Temperatures as high as those normally recorded in August rose above 40 C (104 F) in many Spanish cities.

Neighboring Portugal also saw its warmest May in nine decades, and in France the month was the hottest on record.

"As a result of climate change, heat waves are starting earlier and are becoming more frequent and more severe because of record concentrations of heat-trapping greenhouse gases," the World Meteorological Organization said last week.

"What we are witnessing today is a foretaste of the future."

Despite the extensive planning, early-warning surveillance, and prediction models, preparing for wildfires remains a huge challenge. The EU is expanding a shared pool of planes and helicopters on standby this summer to provide cross-border support and is expected to partner with more nations outside the bloc.



FILE, A firefighter plane drops a fire retardant on a burning area of San Martin de Unx in northern Spain, Sunday, June 19, 2022. Spain is breathing a sigh of relief as a sharp drop in temperatures is helping firefighters contain wildfires across the country that destroyed tens of thousands of acres of wooded land. But it's still only June. Extended drought conditions in several Mediterranean countries, a heat wave last week that reached northern Germany and high fuel costs needed to operate firefighting aircraft have already heightened concerns across Europe this summer. Credit: AP Photo/Miguel Oses, File

"It's very difficult to predict wildfires," said Marta Arbinolo, an OECD policy analyst and climate adaptation and resilience specialist.

"We do know that summer (of) 2022 is predicted by weather forecasts to be particularly warm and dry, possibly even more than 2020 or '21, which was the driest and warmest summer in Europe," she said. "We can expect that the risk of wildfires in Europe for the summer might be very high."

In Greece, which suffered some of Europe's most devastating fires last August, authorities say higher fuel costs have added to challenges facing the fire service, which relies heavily on water-dropping planes to battle blazes in the mountainous country.

Greece will begin using fire retardant chemicals in water drops this year, while the EU is sending more than 200 firefighters and equipment from France, Germany and four other countries to Greece to remain throughout the summer.



A view of the burned landscape after forest fires affected the area near to Miranda de Arga, northern Spain, Thursday, June 16, 2022. Spain is breathing a sigh of relief as a sharp drop in temperatures is helping firefighters contain wildfires across the country that destroyed tens of thousands of acres of wooded land. But it's still only June. Extended drought conditions in several Mediterranean countries, a heat wave last week that reached northern Germany and high fuel costs needed to operate firefighting aircraft have already heightened concerns across Europe this summer. Credit: AP Photo/Alvaro Barrientos, File

Wildfire seasons are also getting longer.

"The concept of a fire season is losing its meaning right now. We have the fire season all year-round," said Victor Resco de Dios, professor of

forest engineering at Lleida University, in Spain's northeastern Catalonia region, which has been hit hard by summer fires.

"The main changes we are seeing with climate change is a longer duration of fire seasons."

Laura Vilagra, a senior Catalonia government official, told a regional conference that fire prevention measures this season could include park closures.

"The weather every year is more adverse, and the drought is very evident this year," she said. "We're expecting a very complicated summer."

Resco foresees a bleak future in Spain, arguing that areas currently affected by fires "probably will not experience many fires by the turn of the century. Why? Because forests would be very scarce. There would be nothing left to burn."



A view of a house in the old village of Aceredo, once submerged three decades ago when a hydropower dam flooded the valley which reemerged due to drought, at the Lindoso reservoir, in northwestern Spain, Friday, Feb. 11, 2022. Spain is breathing a sigh of relief as a sharp drop in temperatures is helping firefighters contain wildfires across the country that destroyed tens of thousands of acres of wooded land. Credit: AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti



Parts of the old village of Aceredo, submerged three decades ago when a hydropower dam flooded the valley, which reemerged due to drought at the Lindoso reservoir, in northwestern Spain, Saturday, Feb. 12, 2022. Spain is breathing a sigh of relief as a sharp drop in temperatures is helping firefighters contain wildfires across the country that destroyed tens of thousands of acres of wooded land. Credit: AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti, File



A firefighter tries to extinguish the fire in a house during a wildfire in Thea area some 60 kilometers (37 miles) northwest of Athens, Greece, Thursday, Aug. 19, 2021. In Greece, which suffered some of Europe's most devastating fires last August, authorities say higher fuel costs have added to challenges facing the Fire Service that relies heavily on water-dropping planes to battle blazes in the mountainous country. Credit: AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis, File



A firefighter tries to extinguish a fire as volunteers hold the water hose in Agios Stefanos, in northern Athens, Greece, Friday, Aug. 6, 2021. In Greece, which suffered some of Europe's most devastating fires last August, authorities say higher fuel costs have added to challenges facing the Fire Service that relies heavily on water-dropping planes to battle blazes in the mountainous country. Credit: AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis, File



Flames burn trees on a hill during a wildfire in Voula suburb, in southern Athens, Greece, Saturday, June 4, 2022. In Greece, which suffered some of Europe's most devastating fires last August, authorities say higher fuel costs have added to challenges facing the Fire Service that relies heavily on water-dropping planes to battle blazes in the mountainous country. Credit: AP Photo/Yorgos Karahalios, File



A man watches as a wildfire approaches Kochyli beach near the village of Limni, on the Evia island, Greece, about 160 kilometers (100 miles) north of Athens, on Aug. 6, 2021. In Greece, which suffered some of Europe's most devastating fires last August, authorities say higher fuel costs have added to challenges facing the Fire Service that relies heavily on water-dropping planes to battle blazes in the mountainous country. Credit: AP Photo/Thodoris Nikolaou, File

Other experts aren't as grim.

The OECD's Gamper and Arbinolo point out that some of the worst fires have actually brought positive developments such as the EU's Civil Protection Mechanism that facilitates rapid cooperation between countries in emergencies. European countries, they argue, are also opening up to incorporate risk reduction in their planning, rather than

simply boosting their firefighting resources.

"The core is the need for integrated fire management, attention to fires all year round rather than just when it is dry, and investment in landscape management," Stoof said.

Gamper appealed for two things she said would have a major impact. First, reconsider urban planning by not building near forests of extreme risk.

"I think our first sort of appeal to countries is really to think about where you continue to settle," Gamper said.

"Second of all, enforce your regulations. Countries know what to do."

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