

What's behind Europe's spate of deadly wildfires?

July 22 2022, by BARRY HATTON



A local resident fights a forest fire with a shovel during a wildfire in Tabara, north-west Spain, July 19, 2022. Major wildfires in Europe are starting earlier in the year, becoming more frequent, doing more damage and getting harder to stop. And, scientists say, they're probably going to get worse as climate change intensifies unless countermeasures are taken. Credit: AP Photo/Bernat Armangue, File

Major wildfires in Europe are starting earlier in the year, becoming more frequent, doing more damage and getting harder to stop.

And, scientists say, they're probably going to get worse as [climate change](#) intensifies unless countermeasures are taken.

A mass migration of Europeans from the countryside to cities in recent decades has left neglected woodland at the mercy of the droughts and heat waves that are increasingly common amid global warming. One tiny spark can unleash an inferno.

Fighting forest fires in Europe has never been so hard. Here's why:

WHAT'S CAUSING EUROPE'S WILDFIRES?

The continent's so-called rural exodus since the second half of the last century, as Europeans moved to cities in search of a better life, has left significant areas of countryside neglected and vulnerable.

Woodland is littered with combustible material, says Johann Goldammer, head of the Global Fire Monitoring Center, an advisory body to the United Nations. That includes things like dead tree trunks and fallen branches, dead leaves and desiccated grass.

"This is why we have unprecedented wildfire risk: because never before in history—say, the last 1,000 or 2,000 years—has there been so much flammable material around," he said.



A helicopter launches water as a wildfire advances near a residential area in Alhaurin de la Torre, Malaga, Spain, July 16, 2022. Major wildfires in Europe are starting earlier in the year, becoming more frequent, doing more damage and getting harder to stop. And, scientists say, they're probably going to get worse as climate change intensifies unless countermeasures are taken. Credit: AP Photo/Gregorio Marrero, File

He adds: "The landscape is getting explosive."

Carelessness with naked flames is often enough to ignite a wildfire. In Portugal, where more than 100 people died in wildfires in 2017, authorities say 62% of outbreaks stem from farming activities such as burning stubble.

IS GLOBAL WARMING A FACTOR IN THE WILDFIRES?

Climate change has added a scary new dimension to wildfires and made them more menacing.

That is especially true in southern Europe, where the increasing occurrence of fire weather conditions—high temperatures, drought and high winds—make summer wildfires "the new norm," says Friederike Otto, Senior Lecturer in Climate Science at the Grantham Institute for Climate Change at Imperial College London.

The European Union noted this month that over the past five years the bloc has witnessed its most intense wildfires on record and that the continent's current drought could become its worst ever. The Mediterranean region is warming 20% faster than the [global average, according to the U.N.](#)



A firefighter tries to extinguish a fire at a house near Megara town, west of Athens, Greece, July 20, 2022. Major wildfires in Europe are starting earlier in the year, becoming more frequent, doing more damage and getting harder to stop. And, scientists say, they're probably going to get worse as climate change intensifies unless countermeasures are taken. Credit: AP Photo/Petros Giannakouris, File

EU fire statistics bear witness to the problem. The amount of burned European countryside has more than tripled this year, with almost 450,000 hectares charred through July 16, compared with a 2006-2021 average of 110,000 hectares in those same months.

By that same date, Europe had witnessed almost 1,900 wildfires compared with an average of 470 for the 2006-2021 period.

ARE WILDFIRES DIFFERENT NOW?

The droughts and [heat waves](#) tied to climate change have made wildfires harder to fight, as conditions make it easier for them to spread quickly. Scientists say climate change will continue to make weather more extreme and wildfires more frequent and destructive.

That includes instances of so-called "megafires"—blazes so big they are virtually unstoppable.

Spain's [wildfire](#) problems this year began with the arrival in spring of the country's earliest heat wave in two decades. Temperatures rose above 40 C (104 F) in many Spanish cities—levels traditionally seen in high summer.



A firefighter tries to extinguish the flames during a wildfire near Megara town, west of Athens, Greece, July 20, 2022. Major wildfires in Europe are starting earlier in the year, becoming more frequent, doing more damage and getting harder to stop. And, scientists say, they're probably going to get worse as climate change intensifies unless countermeasures are taken. Credit: AP Photo/Petros Giannakouris, File

Neighboring Portugal also saw its warmest May in nine decades, when 97% of the land was classified as being in severe drought. In France, it was the hottest May on record.

"We will not be able to completely prevent wildfires," says Otto of Imperial College. "We have to learn to live with this."

HOW DO WE COEXIST WITH MORE WILDFIRES?

Scientists say there is no need to lose hope, despite the images of terrifying walls of flame and overwhelmed fire services.

"This is not an act of god," Otto says of the more frequent wildfires. "This is, to a large degree, our doing and we have quite a lot of (power) to do something about it."

Things we can do to adapt include putting an end to the burning of fossil fuels and educating people about [global warming](#), she says.

Forest management also needs to be reviewed, says Amila Meskin, a [policy adviser](#) at the Brussels-based European State Forest Association, which represents governments' forest companies, enterprises and agencies in 25 European countries.



Charred trees stand after a wildfire near the town of El Pont de Vilomara, Spain, July 19, 2022. Major wildfires in Europe are starting earlier in the year, becoming more frequent, doing more damage and getting harder to stop. And, scientists say, they're probably going to get worse as climate change intensifies unless countermeasures are taken. Credit: AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti, File



A dead goat lies on the ground after a forest fire on a farm in San Martin de Tabara, north-west Spain, July 19, 2022. Major wildfires in Europe are starting earlier in the year, becoming more frequent, doing more damage and getting harder to stop. And, scientists say, they're probably going to get worse as climate change intensifies unless countermeasures are taken. Credit: AP Photo/Bernat Armangue, File



A National Republican Guard firefighter put out a forest fire in the village of Rebolo, near Ansiao central Portugal, July 14, 2022. Major wildfires in Europe are starting earlier in the year, becoming more frequent, doing more damage and getting harder to stop. And, scientists say, they're probably going to get worse as climate change intensifies unless countermeasures are taken. Credit: AP Photo/Armando Franca, File



Alex Codonyer, 55, hugs his son Alan, 12, next to their house burnt during a wildfire in River Park village, near the town of El Pont de Vilomara, Spain, July 19, 2022. Major wildfires in Europe are starting earlier in the year, becoming more frequent, doing more damage and getting harder to stop. And, scientists say, they're probably going to get worse as climate change intensifies unless countermeasures are taken. Credit: AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti, File



Firefighters work at the scene of a wildfire in Tabara, north-west Spain, Tuesday, July 19, 2022. Major wildfires in Europe are starting earlier in the year, becoming more frequent, doing more damage and getting harder to stop. And, scientists say, they're probably going to get worse as climate change intensifies unless countermeasures are taken. Credit: AP Photo/Bernat Armangue, File

Projects such as water retention schemes, mixing forest species and the restoration of peat lands are already happening in some places.

The effects are unlikely to be seen soon, however. Short-term planning in forestry can stretch over 50 years, and fundamental change will take decades.

More broadly, Meskin sees a general lack of interest in rural jobs and

notes that forestry is not a fashionable business. Those sentiments need to be reversed, but that's a big ask.

Maybe, she says, the shock of the wildfires will generate renewed public interest in forest care.

"It's a very emotional thing to see forests burn," Meskin said. "It's such a sad, sad, sad situation."

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