

# Early fires an ominous Greek summer warning: experts

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Helicopters fly over as wildfire rages near Alexandroupoli in northern Greece in August last year.

A year after one of Greece's worst wildfire seasons left over 20 people dead, a record-breaking warm winter and high spring temperatures are

raising fears of another fierce summer.

According to the National Observatory of Athens, fires in 2023 consumed nearly 175,000 hectares (432,000 acres) of forest and farmland in Greece after a two-week heat wave, the longest on record.

The peak temperature was 46.4 degrees Celsius (115.5 Fahrenheit) in the Peloponnese port of Gythio.

"We know we will have a very difficult summer," civil protection minister Vassilis Kikilias told AFP in an interview.

"No one can predict exactly the conditions we will face. But whatever the conditions, we are obliged to fight hard," he said.

Last year's summer was followed by Greece's "warmest winter on record" and April turned out higher-than-normal temperatures too, said National Observatory research director Costas Lagouvardos.

Statistically, that is not a good sign.

"We find that during years of sustained high temperatures, which also means drought, we have large wildfires," Lagouvardos told AFP at the observatory's headquarters on Mount Penteli, overlooking the capital.

Record high temperatures were recorded in Greece during the first week of June, with the mercury hitting 39.3 Celsius (102.7 Fahrenheit), according to the meteo.gr website.

One of last year's most destructive fires in the national park of Dadia—which killed 19 migrants—raged uncontrolled for weeks in August.

It was later classed as the European Union's largest ever wildfire.

In July, Greece carried out its biggest ever wildfire mobilization to evacuate some 20,000 tourists from the island of Rhodes as flames bore down on luxury hotels.

Parents were pictured fleeing on foot to rescue points with children in their arms and anything else they could carry.

## **Ominous warning**

Increased temperatures driven by human-caused fossil-fuel emissions are lengthening fire seasons and causing more land to be burned in some places, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

An [early warning](#) sign for the coming season came on March 31 in the Pierian Mountains of central Greece, when a fire broke out at an altitude of over 1,000 meters (3,280 feet) and took four days to bring under control.

It was a "major wake-up call", Lagouvardos said.

Even the locals could not believe a fire had broken out on formerly snow-covered slopes, Greece's deputy fire chief Nikolaos Roumeliotis told media last week.



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"In all the years I've studied [forest fires](#), I don't recall one (this early) in the year, and at this altitude," said Theodore Giannaros, an atmospheric modeler and fire weather meteorologist at the Athens observatory.

"It's extremely worrying because it shows that as we head towards a warmer and drier climate, key ecosystems that were less vulnerable to fire may gradually become more vulnerable," he said.

Fire department figures already show a 28-percent increase in forest fire outbreaks from January through May compared to last year.

By the end of April, Greece had already dealt with 1,000 fires, including more than 120 in a single day, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said last month.

"We saw rather substantial fires very early in the season. Though not large in scale, they were still quite substantial at that point in the season," Lagouvardos said.

On May 16, Greece's civil protection ministry ran a nationwide exercise bringing together firefighters, the police, the coastguard, the ambulance service and local administration.

Civil protection minister Kikilias says this year's approach will see water bombers in the sky as close to a fire outbreak as possible.

On May 1, stiffer sentences for accidental and premeditated arson came into effect, with perpetrators facing up to 20 years in prison and a fine of up to 200,000 euros (\$218,000).

## **Infrastructure upgrade**

Greece in April unveiled a 2.1-billion-euro upgrade to its civil protection infrastructure, touted as the country's most ambitious to date.

Mostly EU-funded, it includes new water bombers, helicopters, fire engines, thermal cameras and over 100 surveillance drones.

However, delivery of the hardware will not begin until next year.

And the first planes from an order of new DHC-515 water bombers will be delivered in 2027.

Lack of cooperation between Greek agencies was brutally exposed in

2018, when 104 people died at the coastal resort of Mati near Athens in Greece's deadliest fire disaster.

It was subsequently revealed that local mayors did not receive a prompt warning from the fire department to evacuate the area.

Traffic police diverted passing motorists into burning areas. The coastguard was also left out of the loop and took hours to send help by sea.

Giannaros, who sits on the national committee that draws up Greece's daily fire risk map, stresses that given the scale of the problem, fire planning needs to start as early as November.

"We see that conditions favoring the outbreak and spread of fire in recent years appear increasingly early during the season, and conclude later," he said.

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