

Wildfires signal Europe's third heatwave in six weeks as 14,000 excess deaths reported

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As Europe's third heatwave in six weeks sparks deadly wildfires across the continent, the toll of the first two is beginning to be counted.

At least 13 people were caught in a blaze in southern Spain, with another 10 still unaccounted for. The flames have burned through over 55,000 hectares, roughly double the average over the previous two decades for this time of the year.

In France, a 22-year-old firefighter lost his life tackling a fire in the Alps. Hundreds are trying to contain blazes on the border with Spain and in the Fontainebleau forest just 40 miles southeast of Paris. Over 35,400 hectares have been burned in total in the country, four times the recent average.

Fires have also broken out in Portugal, Italy, Greece, Britain and other countries. 155,569 hectares have been burned across the continent, below the 228,098 hectares at the same time last year (Europe's worst ever for wildfires); but scientists fear the early start to the fires may see 2026 exceed the 2025 total.

Temperatures first soared to heatwave levels in May, then again the next month, producing Western Europe's hottest ever June—a staggering 3.06 degrees Celsius hotter than the average in recent decades. Close to 100 million people experienced 40C heat. Globally, 2026 was the second hottest June on record.

Current estimates from the European mortality monitor EuroMOMO report that roughly 10,600 people have been killed by the heat so far, including over 5,000 in Germany, more than 2,700 in Britain and over 2,000 in France. Other estimates are higher, with an analysis by Politico identifying 14,000 deaths in the first heatwave in *Politico* has already published its own analysis finding more than 14,000 excess deaths in just six countries in the June heatwave alone.

On June 28 in a post on X, World Health

Organisation (WHO) head Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus had already said more than 1,300 excess deaths had been recorded since 21 June, just one week, “linked to high temperatures in Europe... Heat stress is often called the ‘silent killer’ - and European homes, workplaces and schools were not built for these temperatures.”

These figures are therefore highly likely to be revised upwards and will be added to by the casualties of the current heatwave, which has already seen Barcelona set a new 40.5C record. Parts of Italy are expected to reach 43C.

Deaths are caused not only by the heat itself, but the effect it has on pollution. Ozone levels, for example, spiked sharply—the gas is created at ground level as other pollutants react in the high temperatures.

As many as 300 million people were exposed to levels higher than the WHO safe limit, according to analysis by Global Witness, including 59 million children and 82 million over-65s. The organisation adds that an estimated 63,000 people died as a result of ozone pollution, which seriously harms the respiratory system, in 2023.

Overall, the WHO believes some 200,000 people have been killed by extreme heat in Europe in just the last four years—deaths it says are for the most part “entirely preventable”. That they are not prevented is due to the prioritisation of profits over lives by the major corporations and their national governments.

Some measures have been taken since the devastating 2003 heatwave. A 2024 study published in *Nature* concluded that the 2022 heatwave would have seen 80 percent more deaths across Europe if these had not been implemented. But the speed of global heating is exposing vastly more people to dangerous temperatures.

France's High Council of Climate expert body was clear in a report issued last week, warning that the country was "not ready" for the consequences and describing current policies as "insufficient". It called for the urgent creation of shaded green spaces and cooling centres, the installation of shutters and awnings, and of air conditioning units in hospitals, care homes and schools. The WHO makes the same recommendations.

Planting more trees in urban spaces is one of the most effective methods, with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change pointing to the benefits for cooling, air quality and carbon sequestration. But across all large cities in OECD countries, tree coverage fell by 72 percent between 1992 and 2018.

A study recently published in *Nature* found that over 80 percent of homes and workplaces in 25 cities across France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Portugal, Greece and the UK had less nearby tree coverage than necessary for a noticeable cooling effect. In Rome, 85 percent of buildings fell below the threshold, in London 93 percent, and in Paris 96 percent.

The potential impact is enormous, with Belgian officials reporting nighttime temperatures 9C higher for poorer, more densely built-up and populated areas of Brussels than leafier richer districts.

In Britain, capitalism has delivered a society in which the poorest sections of the population need "warm banks" in the winter (a play on the food banks necessary throughout the year) and "cool banks" in the summer.

While failing to protect their populations from the consequences of climate change, European governments continue to fuel its causes. After a series of retreats, the European Union's climate policy targets fail to meet what is needed to keep the world to 1.5C of heating above the pre-industrial average.

Its 2035 target of as little as a 66.25 percent reduction in emissions (from 1990 levels) is below the 77 percent required for a 1.5C pathway. Its target of a 90 percent reduction by 2040 is barely adequate, and rests on carbon credit loopholes which make the real reduction more like 85 percent.

Every target falls well short of "fair share" reductions taking account of countries' historic emissions and levels of economic development.

All of which makes the unreasonable assumption that

targets will be met. Currently, Germany was recently projected to exceed its 2030 target by 100 million tonnes of carbon—over a quarter higher than planned. France must cut emissions by 4.6 percent a year, three times faster than it has so far managed. The UK and especially Italy are falling short.

Underlying these failures, which mean decades more heatwaves, wildfires and other environmental catastrophes suffered by hundreds of millions of people in Europe, is intensifying industrial competition between the European and world powers, renewed militarisation, and the enormous profits of fossil fuel companies.

Analysis from the London School of Economics finds that 11 of the largest publicly listed oil and gas firms—including Europe-based Shell, BP, TotalEnergies and Equinor—plan to increase production by an average of 14 percent comparing 2024 to 2030.

Climate science is clear that there can be *no* new long-term oil and gas development if global heating is to be kept well below 2C. But this means nothing to the super-rich shareholders of these companies, whose wealth insulated them from the consequences. Their only concern is to outcompete their rivals for every penny of profit.

There are huge rewards to be had. Six of Europe's leading oil companies made \$21.7 billion in profits in the first quarter of 2026, 43 percent higher than in the same period last year, above all thanks to the war in Iran. The last time they earned more money in a single quarter, according to Global Witness, coincided with the outbreak of the Ukraine war in 2022. Since then, they have made \$252 billion.

It takes very little of this money to fund a relentless lobbying campaign, which puts at least one fossil fuel lobbyist in the European parliament nine out of every 10 days a year, according to Reclaim Finance—the tip of an iceberg of kickbacks, job offers, and undeclared gifts.



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