

Europe unprepared for rapidly growing climate risks, report finds

Dangers of wildfires, extreme weather and other factors outgrowing preparedness, European Environment Agency says

Ajit Niranjana

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Residents help firefighters try to extinguish a wildfire burning near Athens, on 19 July 2023. Photograph: Miloš Bičanski/Getty Images

Europe is not prepared for the rapidly growing climate risks it faces, the European Environment Agency (EEA) has said in its first [risk assessment](#).

From wildfires burning down homes to violent weather straining public finances, the report says more action is needed to address half of the 36 significant climate risks with potentially severe consequences that it identifies for [Europe](#). Five more risks need urgent action, the report says.

“Our new analysis shows that Europe faces urgent climate risks that are growing faster than our societal preparedness,” said Leena Ylä-Mononen, the EEA’s executive director.

The report looks at how severe the climate threats are and how well prepared Europe is to deal with them. It says the most pressing risks – which are growing worse as fossil fuel pollution heats the planet – are heat stress, flash floods and river floods, the health of coastal and marine ecosystems, and the need for solidarity funds to recover from disasters.

When the researchers reassessed six of the risks for southern Europe, which they described as a “hotspot” region, they found urgent action was also needed to keep crops safe and to protect people, buildings and nature from wildfires.

There is increasing evidence of adaptation but “it’s certainly not enough”, said Robbert Biesbroek, a report author from Wageningen University, who also co-edited the chapter on Europe in the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report on adaptation.

“It’s not going quickly enough and it’s not reaching the ones that need it most,” he said. “It’s quite scary in that sense.”

The report also warns of “cascading and compounding” risks, which it says current stress tests in the financial sector are likely to underestimate. Hot weather will dry out southern Europe, for instance, killing crops and shrinking water supplies, but will also harden soils, making flash floods more likely, and dry out vegetation, meaning wildfires can spread faster.

Governments trying to respond to several crises will be more stretched for resources, as will communities that fail to prepare.

“The risks are simply outpacing the developments of policies,” said Blaž Kurnik, the head of the EEA impacts and adaptation group.

Europe has heated up more than any other continent since the Industrial Revolution. It has heated about twice as fast as the global average as carbon dioxide has clogged the atmosphere and trapped sunlight.

The researchers looked at two possible scenarios of low and high warming over the century. They did not consider potential tipping points in the climate system, arguing that the effects of such dramatic changes would unfold over

longer time periods and so did not change the urgency of action in the short term.

Daniela Schmidt, of Bristol University, who sat on the advisory board of the report but was not involved in writing it, said the geographical granularity that the report offered was important but questioned whether another report on risks was needed.

She said: “Will it increase the action, will it make people more ready, to have more information about what those key risks for us are looking like?”

Schmidt, who also co-led the chapter on Europe for the IPCC report on adaptation, said people should understand that governments, cities and individuals had agency to reduce risks – and that actions to do so would come with benefits such as cleaner air and better housing. “How can we facilitate that people know they have the power to do something?” she said

The European Commission said it would present a communication on managing climate risks early this week.

The EEA report says several climate risks have already reached critical levels. If decisive action is not taken now, it says, most climate risks could reach critical or catastrophic levels by the end of this century.

“This should be the final wake-up call,” said Ylä-Mononen.