

France overwhelmed as wildfires rage across Europe



France overwhelmed as wildfires rage across Europe / Photo> AP Picture Alliance

Paris, August 12 (RHC)-- France is battling a spate of wildfires, including a "monster" blaze in the parched southwest that has forced thousands to evacuate. Officials said Thursday six EU nations are sending firefighting teams and equipment to contain the raging flames which has left France overwhelmed.

Wildfires have broken out across Europe this summer as successive heatwaves bake the continent. Most of France is sweltering under a summer heatwave compounded by a record drought.

The European Commission said four firefighting planes would be sent to France from Greece and Sweden, while teams from Austria, Germany, Poland and Romania were on their way.

Among eight major fires currently raging, the biggest is the Landiras fire in the southwest Gironde department, whose forests and beaches draw huge tourist crowds each summer. It had already burned 14,000 hectares (35,000 acres) in July -- the driest month seen in France since 1961 -- before being

contained, but it continued to smolder in the region's tinder-dry pine forests and peat-rich soil.

"It's an ogre, it's a monster," Gregory Allione from the French firefighters body FNSPF told RTL radio. On Thursday, more than 1,000 firefighters backed by water-bombing aircraft tried to contain the blaze in Gironde, that has forced thousands of people from their homes.

Firefighters warned of an "explosive cocktail" of weather conditions with wind and the tinder-box conditions helping fan the flames. More than 57,200 hectares have been engulfed in flames so far in France this year, nearly six times the full-year average for 2006-2021, data from the European Forest Fire Information System shows.

Europe is currently suffering from its most severe drought in decades as the climate-driven calamity is affecting homes, factories, farmers and freight across the continent and with drier winters and searing summers, fueled by global warming, persisting water shortage will be on the horizon for Europeans.

On Tuesday, the European Commission Joint Research Centre (EC-JRC) warned that the existing drought could be the worst in 500 years, making the grim prediction of worsening the severe draught in Europe, potentially reaching 47 percent of the continent.

The predictions were given by senior researcher Andrea Toreti during a virtual press conference. "We haven't analyzed fully the event (this year's drought), because it is still ongoing, but based on my experience I think that this is perhaps even more extreme than 2018," he said.

"Just to give you an idea the 2018 drought was so extreme that, looking back at least the last 500 years, there were no other events similar to the drought of 2018, but this year I think it is really worse than 2018," Toreti added.

According to the researcher, the fact that in the course of the next three months there would still be a very high risk of dry conditions over western and central Europe, as well as the United Kingdom, is causing concern.

The drought-affected regions will expand and lack of water will increase if effective mitigation measures are not taken, Toreti further warned.

Without such measures, "this intensity and frequency will increase dramatically over Europe, both in the north and in the south," he noted, adding that Italy, in particular the River Po, is among the most affected as well as southern France and large areas of Spain and Portugal.

"Our analysis indeed is pointing to extremely low flows affecting almost all the European rivers. The Rhine river, for instance, that is causing big troubles for instance in the Netherlands," Toreti further said.

The warning came as France is in the midst of its fourth heatwave of the year, and in the UK, which is not known for its hot summers, a four-day "extreme heat" warning of over 35 Celsius has been issued again for England's southern and central regions, starting on Thursday evening.

British authorities have already warned that such extreme heat could cause wildfires and pressure water supplies and transport services. "The grass in London is tinderbox dry and the smallest of sparks can start a blaze which could cause devastation," said London Fire Brigade Assistant Commissioner Jonathan Smith on Thursday.

Other European nations have also experienced a scorching heatwave in the past weeks with temperatures often exceeding 40 Celsius.



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