Rapid climate change brings wildfire threat to new corners of Europe

Scorching conditions this year have triggered wildfires in European countries that are normally considered to be damp and cool

By Madeleine Cuff on September 3, 2026

A wildfire in Cotignac, France, on 21 July 2026. FBM Media/Getty Images

Summer in Europe is no longer just a season of heatwaves and holidays. It is also, increasingly, a season of fire.

Following the pattern of recent years, 2026 saw huge fires break out across the continent, fuelled by weeks of hot, dry weather. Fires in France and Spain hit the headlines, but the UK, Belgium, Germany, Portugal and Italy have all also seen fierce blazes sweep through forests, grasslands and nature reserves.

Since the start of the year, almost 650,000 hectares of land have burned across the European Union, according to the European Commission, the result of over 1913 separate large wildfires across the bloc.

“Europe’s wildfires this summer have been extremely severe and destructive, and reached new corners of our continent,” Wopke Hoekstra, European commissioner for climate, net zero and clean growth, wrote on LinkedIn at the end of August. “The scale of what is happening is hard to ignore.”

On both sides of the Atlantic, the fire season has been far more severe than normal. In Europe, the area of land burned so far this year is almost double the long-term average. It is a similar story in the US, where the area of land burned so far this year is 163 per cent of the 10-year average.

But although this year has been bad by past standards, it still doesn't come close to surpassing the devastation wildfires wreaked in 2025, still by far the most severe year on record for Europe, with more than 1 million hectares burned.

Instead, what has been notable about this year's blazes is where they have appeared. Fires have burned across the European continent, but in southern Europe, traditionally the most fire-prone region, it has been relatively quiet. Northern and western European countries, however, like France, Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK – which aren't used to dealing with severe wildfires – have suffered intense burns. For some, these have been larger and more widespread than what has been ever seen before.

In England and Wales, for example, fire and rescue services have responded to 1132 wildfires so far this year, outstripping the total for the whole of 2025, which was itself a record year. The fires tore through homes, closed major roads, and crept perilously close to a nuclear power plant, all in a country better-known for its rain than its heat.

"I think what is particularly interesting for this season, in 2026, is not the total area burned… but how quicky conditions developed, and how geographically widespread the fire danger became," says Francesca Di Giuseppe at the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts.

The conditions in Europe this year have been perfect for wildfires. An unusually wet winter encouraged rampant growth of grasslands, shrublands and forest understories. In May, the weather then shifted abruptly, bringing heatwaves in rapid succession and very little rainfall across swathes of the continent. The ground dried out, vegetation withered and a flash drought emerged on a grand scale. That left a dry, hot landscape littered with fuel. Add in high winds, and it was only a matter of time before fires broke out.

"If you have 30 per cent of Europe fire-prone, somewhere it is going to happen," says Di Giuseppe. "And if those conditions are sufficiently extreme, it will be very difficult to suppress the fire."

This summer's weather may have been unusually extreme, but it will become the new normal as global temperatures rise. Europe is one of the fastest-warming regions of the world. Across southern Europe, the number of summer days with fire-prone conditions has more than doubled since 1981, and the threat of catastrophic fires will only increase on the continent as the climate continues to warm, scientists predict. "The increasing frequency of hot, dry and windy conditions is consistent with the broader trend we expect under climate change," says Maik Billing at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Research in Germany.

And, as we have seen this summer, in northern Europe the risk is rising rapidly from what was a low baseline. Managing the growing threat will require a significant shift in mindset, warns Alexander Held at the European Forest Institute. “When people outside of the UK think about the UK, they think of rain,” he says. “It you look at Ireland or Wales, where in a good year you have 2000 millimetres of rain, it is difficult for people to grasp that these landscapes are now burning.”

Much comes down to adopting common-sense behaviour in a fire-prone landscape – behaviour that is probably second nature to most citizens of southern Europe. In May, a major fire broke out at a Dutch military training ground, after the army trained with explosives during dry weather, prompting calls for training exercises to be halted at times of high fire risk.

In the UK, disposable barbecues were banned in August after they were found to have started fires in London, Staffordshire and Cheshire this summer. Simultaneously, the UK government sent out a nationwide alert to citizen smartphones, warning of a “very high risk of wildfires nationally” – the biggest use of the alert system to date – in the hope of curbing risky behaviours such as lighting barbecues or letting off fireworks.

Managing population movement from the countryside into cities is also a factor. In the US, urban sprawl has been blamed for bringing residents of cities such as Los Angeles into closer contact with the wildfire-prone countryside. But across Europe, rural abandonment is having the opposite effect; experts have warned that abandoned farmland provided plentiful fuel for the 2025 wildfires that swept through Greece, Turkey and Cyprus. The pruning, bush clearing and grazing that comes with managing a working farm is essential for fire suppression – policy-makers will need to find new ways to entice people back into the countryside to manage the fire frontiers.

Fire prevention can sometimes take the form of more unusual action – such as deer culling, says Held. In countries like the UK and Germany, earthworms are vital for clearing up leaf litter in forests before it becomes fire fuel in dry weather. But offering them the right species of leaf litter is important. In Germany’s Black Forest, for instance, earthworms love maple, cherry, lime and oak litter, but dislike conifer needles and beech litter. Unfortunately, the wild deer which roam the region’s woodlands have the same preference. As they graze and kill saplings, they are leaving the forests full of beech and conifers.

“You can see that in areas where we have too many deer, the decomposition of the [leaf] litter is not happening,” says Held.

In a similar vein, work is also needed to reshape forests to reduce monocultures and encourage native, broadleaf species which are more fire resistant. “It makes a big difference if you have a pine plantation with grass understory, where you have sunlight, wind, high temperature, drought, everything, or you have a very close to nature forest where you have shade, moisture, low temperature, no wind,” says Held.

Technology can also help. In May, a SpaceX rocket carried four new satellites into space, designed to help Greece better detect and track wildfires across its territories. FireSat is the same idea on a grander scale. Run by the non-profit Earth Fire Alliance with the help of Google, by 2030 it aims to have a constellation of 50 satellites scanning the most fire-prone spots on Earth, able to spot a fire as small as a beach bonfire. Three satellites entered orbit in July, joining the pilot satellite launched last year.

Meanwhile, at ground level, feeds from camera networks can be monitored by AI software to spot the first signs of smoke. In California, a network of more than 1300 cameras covers fire-prone areas across the state. AI technology is used to scan the feeds and alert emergency services if fire is detected, with the aim of stopping fires before they have a chance to gather strength.

The system has helped firefighters react quickly to smother blazes that would have burned thousands of acres, according to Neal Driscoll at UC San Diego. The same technology is now arriving in Europe: in the Gironde, a region of France hit hardest by wildfires this summer, firefighters are now employing AI-assisted cameras to raise the alarm on emerging blazes. Solar-powered patrol drones could be next.

Yet fire management can take us only so far. Research published in August warns that by the end of this century, the area burned by wildfires in Europe will increase by 39 per cent even under a low-emissions scenario, and could almost triple under high emissions. Improvements in fire management could reduce these increases by more than 70 per cent, but not eliminate them entirely, the study found.

Some researchers think the fire risk is already beyond our control, particularly in southern Europe, which normally bears the brunt of “fire weather”. Raul Cordero Carrasco at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands points out that the burned area in southern Europe has been rising since 2018. He thinks this is a sign that investment in suppression and management is hitting its limit. In southern Europe, he argues, “climate change is making fires unstoppable”.

“When the temperature is very high and the winds are very strong, there is nothing you can do to stop the fire,” he says.

But for northern Europe at least, where large fires are still a mercifully rare event, there is plenty of work that can and must be done to mitigate further risk. Not every summer will be like the hot, dry days of 2026. But the threat is advancing, and this summer has been our amber warning to prepare.