

Headline: Southern Europe braces for climate change-fueled summer of drought

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A view shows the ground of the Rialb reservoir as drinking water supplies have plunged to their lowest level since 1990 due to extreme drought, in the village of Bassella, Spain May 6, 2023. REUTERS FILE PHOTO

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BRUSSELS — Southern Europe is bracing for a summer of ferocious drought, with some regions already suffering water shortages and farmers expecting their worst yields in decades.

As climate change makes the region hotter and drier, years of consecutive drought have depleted groundwater reserves. Soils have become bone dry in Spain and southern France. Low river and reservoir levels are threatening this summer's hydropower production.

With temperatures climbing into summertime, scientists warn Europe is on track for another brutal summer, after suffering its hottest on record last year – which fueled a drought European Union researchers said was the worst in at least 500 years.

So far this year, the situation is most severe in Spain.

"The situation of drought is going to worsen this summer," said Jorge Olcina, professor of geographic analysis at the University of Alicante, Spain.

There's little chance at this point of rainfall resolving the underlying drought, either. "At this time of the year, the only thing we can have are punctual and local storms, which are not going to solve the rainfall deficit," Olcina said.

Seeking emergency EU assistance, Spain's Agriculture Minister Luis Planas warned that "the situation resulting from this drought is of such magnitude that its consequences cannot be tackled with national funds alone," according to an April 24 letter sent to the European Commission (EC) and seen by Reuters.

Southern Europe is not alone in suffering severe water shortages this year. The Horn of Africa is enduring its worst drought in decades, while a historic drought in Argentina has hammered soy and corn crops.

More frequent and severe drought in the Mediterranean region – where the average temperature is now 1.5C higher than 150 years ago – is in line with how scientists have forecast climate change will impact the region.

"In terms of the climate change signal, it very much fits with what we're expecting," said Hayley Fowler, Professor of Climate Change Impacts at Newcastle University.

Despite these long-held forecasts, preparation is lagging. Many farming regions have yet to adopt water-saving methods like precision irrigation or switch to more drought-hardy crops, such as sunflowers.

“Governments are late. Companies are late,” said Robert Vautard, a climate scientist and director of France’s Pierre-Simon Laplace Institute. “Some companies are not even thinking of changing the model of their consumption, they are just trying to find some miraculous technologies that would bring water.”

France is emerging from its driest winter since 1959, with drought “crisis” alerts already activated in four departmental prefects, restricting non-priority water withdrawals – including for agriculture, according to government website Propluvia.

Portugal, too, is experiencing an early arrival of drought. Some 90% of the mainland is suffering from drought, with severe drought affecting one-fifth of the country – nearly five times the area reported a year earlier.

In Spain, which saw less than half its average rainfall through April this year, thousands of people are relying on truck deliveries for drinking water, while regions including Catalonia have imposed water restrictions.

Some farmers have already reported crop losses as high as 80%, with cereals and oilseeds among those affected, farming groups have said.

“This is the worst loss of harvest for decades,” Pekka Pesonen, who heads the European farming group Copa-Cogeca, said of Spain. “It’s worse than last year’s situation.”

Spain is responsible for half of the EU’s production of olives and one third of its fruit, according to the Commission.

With its reservoirs at on average 50% of capacity, the country last week earmarked more than 2 billion euros (\$2.20 billion) in emergency response funding. It is still awaiting a reply from the Commission on its request for a 450-million-euro crisis fund to be mobilized from the bloc’s farming subsidy budget.

The Commission said it was monitoring the situation closely.

“Severe drought in Southern Europe is particularly worrying, not only for the farmers there but also because this can push up already very high consumer prices if the EU production is significantly lower,” Commission spokesperson Miriam Garcia Ferrer said.

Similar struggles could emerge in Italy, where up to 80% of the country’s water supply goes toward agriculture. With this year’s thin mountain snow cover and low soil moisture, Italian farmers are planning to cut back – sowing summer crops across an area 6% smaller than last year’s planting area, according to national data on sowing intentions.

After two years of water scarcity, parts of northern Italy entered May with a 70% deficit in snow water reserves and a 40% deficit of soil moisture, said Luca Brocca, a Director of Research at Italy’s National Research Council.

With the ground so parched, rain when it does arrive fails to soak in, with devastating consequences. Authorities in Italy on Wednesday said at least three people had been killed in floods in Italy’s Emilia Romagna region, where the rains were expected to continue for several hours.

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