



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Heat waves are not incidents but a rule - Europe is late with a systematic response



European countries still treat extremely high summer temperatures as a climate anomaly, even though all indications are that heat waves have become the new normal.

The great variety in the measures implemented by the states to protect the population from heat waves this summer should become a thing of the past and urgently replaced by shared, coordinated policies because extreme heat will happen every year.

We will anticipate that is going to continue, ” and the reason why we think that’s going to continue, is because we continue to put greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere”, said Gavin Schmidt, leading NASA climatologist last Thursday.

Mr Schmidt said that this July is already the warmest in hundreds if not thousands of years, and 2023 is likely to be the warmest year on record.

Ad hoc measures are not enough

Europe is fundamentally unprepared and unequipped for a systematic response to the extremely high summer temperatures, of which it has been a victim for years in a row.

Heat waves claimed around 61,000 lives in Europe last year, according to a recent report in the Nature Medicine journal.

This year's numbers could only be worse because the heat is more intense and lasts longer, and in the meantime, there have been no significant changes in the policies dealing with protecting the population from heat waves.

Defence is still reduced to ad hoc measures, which remedy the consequences in the short term, almost immediately - for example, Red Cross activists hand out bottles of water to tourists waiting in line to visit tourist sites, or tours are cancelled during the hottest period.

The most popular tourist destinations in Europe, Italy, Spain, and Greece, are also the most affected by heat waves.

They will face the same problem next year and in the following years but will not solve it with volunteer actions and campaigns to warn of extreme heat.

European tourism at risk

The large EU members, where tourism is a significant source of income, have been facing business risks due to frequent heat waves.

The number of tourists intending to spend a summer in the Mediterranean from June to November is 10% lower this year than in 2022 (European Travel Commission) because of frequent heat waves in Southern Europe.

High temperatures seriously change established travel patterns. Tourist exchange the overheated European tourist capitals, such as Rome or Athens, for northern destinations or bypass Europe and travel somewhere else during the summer.

The countries most affected by heat waves have been invited to provide models for more active and effective adaptation to extreme climate conditions, since they are no longer an incident but a rule.

A large part of their income from tourism threatens to move elsewhere, to cooler

destinations and places along the coast or in the mountains.

Workers without protection from heat

More effective regulation of working conditions at high temperatures is an even more significant priority for European adaptation to frequent heat waves.

For example, there is still no shared standard on the maximum outdoor working temperatures at the EU level.

This clear limit exists at the national level, but only in six European countries, while in the vast majority, it is up to employers to decide the heat limit their employees can be exposed to.

Close to a quarter of EU workers are exposed to extremely high temperatures during at least a quarter of their working time. In some sectors, such as agriculture and industry, that percentage is even higher and by far the highest (38%) in construction.

The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), a major union representing workers at the EU level, has been asking the EU for years to protect workers systematically from heat risks at work, including regulations on the maximum outdoor working temperature.

"The current factual knowledge about the serious effects on health and productivity that heat can cause is enough to justify legislation", said Tord Kjellström, a long-time researcher into the effects of climate change on human health.

Time-consuming and expensive changes

Europe will not adapt easily and quickly to frequent heat waves, even though it has been leading the global fight to reduce and eliminate carbon dioxide emissions.

Changes in this respect require time, such as greening zones in large cities to cool down heat islands.

In addition to being long-term, these measures also require large-scale investments, for example, relocating significant facilities from heat-risk areas to less heated city areas.

The EU Environment Agency announced last June that almost half of the hospitals (46%) and schools (43%) in European cities are located in "heat islands", which increases the exposure of a large number of people and sensitive populations to health risks due to high temperatures.

Since long-term measures to protect against heat waves have been largely absent, Europeans will inevitably turn to rapid solutions, such as installing more air conditioning than before, primarily in homes but also in workplaces.

Europe has been traditionally very scarce in this respect. Only 10 to 20% of households have air conditioning, while in the US, even 90% of homes have air conditioning.

This is the result of high environmental awareness and traditional resistance to the introduction of cooling devices in homes as a major source of global greenhouse gas emissions.

According to the World Bank, air conditioning,

refrigerators, and other cooling devices, participate with more than 10% in the global emission of harmful gases, which is twice as much as air and sea traffic combined.

However, estimates say that air conditioning use will increase precisely because of frequent and longer heat waves, and thus the cause of those waves will increase.

This vicious circle cannot be broken quickly and easily. This summer's heat waves also warn that the first steps must be taken through shared European policies that would provide a unique and systematic response to the threat that has already become an integral part of every summer.