



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

Europe pays increasing price for climate change



Spring and the approach of summer have, over the last couple of years not only brought the pleasant contemplation of holidays and basking in sunshine but increasingly also the dreaded anticipation of heatwaves, forest fires and other extreme weather events in Europe. This year, the climate stress has started even earlier.

With drought in the north and floods in the south this spring, Europe is increasingly paying the price for unusual and extreme weather patterns, made more likely by global warming.

The European Commission has just in the last few days called on consumers to use less water, and a new **report** shows the damage to farming from climate change.

Large parts of northern Europe, including the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium are facing one of the driest springs on record.

Hosepipe bans for things such as watering gardens or washing cars are being contemplated in the UK and have been instituted in parts of the Netherlands.

The level of the Rhine River where it enters the Netherlands is 1.5 metres below what it should be at this time of year. In Belgium, two provinces have issued a 'code red' warning for forest fires. German officials speak of a 'tipping point' for agriculture.

The situation is so dire that even the soon expected rainfall is not likely to make up for the water deficit. On the other hand, parts of France and Spain are experiencing lethal flooding.

Losses in the agriculture sector

A new **report** backed by the European Commission and the European Investment Bank estimates annual losses in the agriculture sector at € 28.3 billion and expects them to rise by a further 66 per cent by 2050 if climate change is not checked. Most of the losses are uninsured, and farmers bear the brunt of

them.

That's quite ironic, given that farmers' organisations in Europe have targeted the EU's Green Deal environmental strategy. Brussels has already watered down environmental aspects of its Common Agricultural Policy (**CAP**) under the pressure of farmers' demonstrations.

The EU is planning subsidies for farmers to reduce water use for irrigation

Even now, when parts of Europe are suffering from possibly one of the worst droughts since records began, the European Commission has revealed that it's considering steps to further appease farmers and reduce the impact of environmental policies on them.

The proposals include setting aside less grassland for preservation. Critics have pointed out that weakening protections for wetlands will make agriculture even more vulnerable to floods and drought.

Agriculture is a major focus, both of the costs associated with extreme climate events and of the role it plays in climate change. Emissions from livestock, for example, are a major source of greenhouse gases. And the sector overall consumes more water than any other, particularly in Southern Europe.

A leaked (no pun intended) European Commission report on water use shows that the EU is likely to face intense water challenges due to pollution and climate change and is planning **subsidies** for farmers to reduce water use for irrigation.

A drop in the ocean

But the Commission is also calling on the public to reduce water use long-term. Jessika Roswall, the Commissioner for Environment, Water Resilience and a Competitive Circular Economy, told German media that "Industry,

agriculture, but also we as consumers, need to be aware that water is a finite resource.”

She is **proposing** better monitoring of water use in the home, just as during the energy crisis when more awareness led to large savings. Still, such measures might just be a drop in the ocean.

The last few years have all seen the highest annual economic losses due to severe weather- and climate-related extreme events

Overall economic damage due to extreme weather in Europe has escalated from annual losses of €8.5 billion in the 1980s to €44.5 billion between 2020 and 2023, **according** to the European Environment Agency (EEA).

Part of this is no doubt due to other factors, such as the rising value of real estate, greater population densities, changing economic activities, etc. But a large part is also due to climate change.

The last few years have all seen the highest annual economic losses due to severe weather- and climate-related extreme events, according to the EEA. And since these “are expected to intensify further, it seems unlikely that associated economic losses will reduce by 2030.”

The target is becoming ever less realistic

Global warming, as the term implies, is not a phenomenon that Europe can deal with by itself. American withdrawal from the Paris Agreement under Trump, as well as unclear commitments and reporting from major emitters such as the G20 countries, are already threatening the goal of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

Last year was the hottest on record, and it now looks as if this year will be in the top three, if not the second hottest.

The 1.5 degrees goal is measured against a longer period, and even several years of higher temperatures do not necessarily mean that it has already been breached.

Climate stress, such as the current drought in northern Europe, has become a daily background buzz

But there’s increasing concern among climate scientists that the target is becoming ever less realistic. And there’s a consensus that any additional rise can have disastrous consequences, not just for extreme weather but also for things such as desertification and rising sea levels.

Climate stress, such as the current drought in northern Europe, has become a daily background buzz. Rather than spurring governments and business to action, it’s become one more fact of life that is being tuned out amid other, seemingly more pressing, concerns.

New priorities clash with environmental goals

The EU’s Green Deal concessions to farmers are not an isolated incident. As the bloc gives precedence to goals such as increasing competitiveness, stopping democratic backsliding and rebuilding the continent’s militaries, the environment is sliding down the list of priorities.

In some cases, these new priorities actively clash with environmental goals. The construction of data centres and server farms for more compute to aid the development of AI, for example, can both require huge amounts of electricity and water for cooling.



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It's not just the EU that's struggling with these contradictory pressures. The same can be seen in the UK, with the fraught debate on whether to adhere to a national 'net-zero' strategy.

Most strikingly, former Prime Minister Tony Blair **intervened** in the debate to say that the public was losing faith in climate policies and that a radically different, more technology-oriented approach was needed.

Blair's remarks were condemned by many as unhelpful, but they do highlight the shifting climate policy landscape.

In the summer of 2022, the year that Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Rhine was so low that ancient 'hunger stones', historically used to indicate extreme drought, were visible above the water surface, and navigation became impossible on stretches of the river.

While it's debatable how much Europe is doing to counter Russia in Ukraine, it does seem clear that its efforts to counter climate change have taken a backseat in the intervening years. A world in which the hunger stones make more and more appearances is getting closer.