

Climate

EU unveils climate rules

Floods show need to cut emissions, adapt

BRUSSELS, July 18, (AP) — Just as the European Union was announcing plans to spend billions of euros to contain climate change, massive clouds gathered over Germany and nearby nations to unleash an unprecedented storm that left death and destruction in its wake.

Despite ample warnings, politicians and weather forecasters were shocked at the ferocity of the precipitation that caused flash flooding that claimed more than 150 lives this week in the lush rolling hills of Western Europe.

Climate scientists say the link between extreme weather and global warming is unmistakable and the urgency to do something about climate change undeniable.

Scientists can't yet say for sure whether climate change caused the flooding, but they insist that it certainly exacerbates the extreme weather that has been on show from the western US and Canada to Siberia to Europe's Rhine region.

"There is a clear link between extreme precipitation occurring and climate change," Wim Thiery, a professor at Brussels University, said Friday.

Stefan Rahmstorf, a professor of ocean physics at the University of Potsdam, referring to the recent heat records set in the US and Canada, said "some are so extreme that they would be virtually impossible without global warming."

Taking them all together, said Sir David King, chair of the Climate Crisis Advisory Group, "these are casualties of the climate crisis: we will only see these extreme weather events become more frequent."

For Diederik Samsom, the European Commission's Cabinet chief behind this week's massive proposals to spend billions and force industry into drastic reforms to help cut the bloc's emissions of the gases that cause global warming by 55% this decade, this week's disaster was a cautionary tale.

"People are washed away in Germany ... and Belgium and the Netherlands, too. We are experiencing climate change," he said on a conference call of the European Policy Centre think tank. "A few years ago, you had to point to a point in the future or far away on the planet to talk about climate change. It's happening now - here."

Calamity

And climate scientists point toward two specific things that have contributed to this week's calamity.

First, with every 1 degree Celsius (1.8 degrees Fahrenheit) rise in temperature, the air can take in 7% more humidity. It can hold the water longer, leading to drought, but it also leads to an increase in dense, massive rainfall once it releases it.

Another defining factor is the tendency for storms to hover over one place for far longer than usual, thus dumping increasing amounts of rain on a smaller patch of the world. Scientists say warming is a contributing factor there, too. A jet stream of high winds six miles (nearly 10 kilometers) high helps determine the weather over Europe and is fed by temperature differences between the tropics and the Arctic.

Yet as Europe warms — with Scandinavia currently experiencing an unusual heat wave — the jet stream is weakened, causing its meandering course to stop, sometimes for days, Thiery said.

He said such a phenomenon was visible in Canada too, where it helped cause a "heat dome" in which temperatures rose to 50 C (122 F).

"And it is causing the heavy rain that we have seen in Western Europe," he said.

Even if greenhouse gas emissions are drastically curbed in the coming decades, the amount of carbon dioxide and other planet-heating gases already in the atmosphere means extreme weather is going to become more likely.

Experts say such phenomena will hit those areas that aren't prepared for it particularly hard.

"We need to make our built environment — buildings, outdoor spaces, cities — more resilient to climate change," said Lamia Messari-Becker, a professor of engineering at the University of Siegen.

Those that don't adapt will risk greater loss of life and damage to property, said Ernst Rauch, chief climate and geoscientist at the reinsurer Munich Re.

"The events of today and yesterday or so give us a hint that we need to do better with respect to being ready for these types of events," he said. "The events themselves are not really unexpected, but the order of magnitude probably has surprised some."

The European Union has unveiled sweeping new legislation recently to help meet its pledge to cut emissions of the gases that cause global warming by 55% over this decade, including a controversial plan to tax foreign companies for the pollution they cause.

The legislation presented by the EU's executive branch, the European Commission, encompasses about a dozen major proposals, ranging from the de-facto phasing out of gasoline and diesel cars by 2035 to new levies on gases from heating buildings.

They involve a revamp of the bloc's emissions trading program, under which companies pay for carbon dioxide they emit, and introduce taxes on shipping and aviation fuels for the first time.

Most of the proposals build on existing laws that were designed to meet the EU's old goal of a 40% cut in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared to 1990 levels — and must be endorsed by the 27 member countries and EU lawmakers.

Temperatures

World leaders agreed six years ago in Paris to work to keep global temperatures from increasing more than 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit), and ideally no more than 1.5 degrees C (2.7 F) by the end of the century. Scientists say both goals will be missed by a wide margin unless drastic steps are taken to reduce emissions.

"The principle is simple: emission of CO2 must have a price, a price on CO2 that incentivizes consumers, producers and innovators to choose the clean technologies, to go toward the clean and sustainable products," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said.

In another development, the left-leaning government of Greenland has decided to suspend all oil exploration off the world's largest island, calling it is "a natural step" because the Arctic government "takes the climate crisis seriously."

No oil has been found yet around Greenland, but officials there had seen potentially vast reserves as a way to help Greenlanders realize their long-held dream of independence from Denmark by cutting the annual subsidy of 3.4 billion kroner (\$540 million) the Danish territory receives.

Global warming means that retreating ice could uncover potential oil and mineral resources which, if successfully tapped, could dramatically change the fortunes of the semiautonomous territory of 57,000 people.

"The future does not lie in oil. The future belongs to renewable energy, and in that respect we have much more to gain," the Greenland government said in a statement. The government said it "wants to take co-responsibility for combating the global climate crisis."

The decision was made June 24 but made public Thursday. The US Geological Survey estimates there could be 17.5 billion undiscovered barrels of oil and 148 trillion cubic feet of natural gas off Greenland, although the island's remote location and harsh weather have limited exploration.

When the current government, led by the Inuit Atqatiguit party since an April's parliamentary election, it immediately began to deliver on election promises and stopped plans for uranium mining in southern Greenland.



In this Dec 16, 2020, file photo, the Pfizer vaccine for COVID-19 is administered at the Arizona Department of Health Services State Laboratory in Phoenix. On July 9, Arizona reported 921 additional confirmed COVID-19 cases, the biggest daily increase in two months, as the coronavirus continued to spread among unvaccinated people. (AP)

Coronavirus

Disinformation about vaccines killing people

US battles 'pandemic of unvaccinated'

WASHINGTON, July 18, (AP) — Two weeks after celebrating America's near "independence" from the coronavirus, President Joe Biden is confronting the worrying reality of rising cases and deaths — and the limitations of his ability to combat the persistent vaccine hesitance responsible for the summer backslide.

Cases of COVID-19 have tripled over the past three weeks, and hospitalizations and deaths are rising among unvaccinated people. While the rates are still sharply down from their January highs, officials are concerned by the reversing trends and what they consider needless illness and death. And cases are expected to continue to rise in coming weeks.

While the national emergency may have faded, officials say the outbreak is now a more localized crisis in communities where not enough people have rolled up their sleeves.

"Look, the only pandemic we have is among the unvaccinated," Biden said Friday, echoing comments made earlier in the day by Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The rising numbers are being driven by large pockets of infection among the more than 90 million eligible Americans who have yet to get shots. Just four states with low vaccination rates made up 40% of new cases last week, and nearly half of them came from Florida alone.

But there is little appetite in the White House for a return to broad mandates for masks or other measures, as 161 million Americans are already fully vaccinated.

Reflecting that mindset, Walensky said Friday that in low-vaccination areas with rising cases, "local policymakers might consider whether masking at that point would be something that would be helpful for their community."

Some communities are acting. Los Angeles County on Thursday reinstated its requirement that masks be worn in most indoor settings regardless of vaccination status, and health officials in Las Vegas recommended on Friday that workers and patrons in the tourism hotspot wear face coverings while inside.

With three highly effective vaccines authorized for use in the US, the Biden administration believes the most effective way to attack the virus is not trying to slow the spread with mass masking and such — something the US showed it was not very good at last year — but to continue to press the importance of vaccinations.

It's no easy fix. Many Americans remain resistant or unmotivated to get shots, despite months of often-creative efforts by federal and state officials and the private sector to spread information about vaccine safety and accessibility.

Surgeon General Vivek Murthy added that while government can play an important role, "this has got to be an 'all of the above' strategy with everybody in," including schools, employers, technology companies and individuals.

In recent days, the administration has turned its focus to younger Americans. It enlisted pop star Olivia Rodrigo for a day-long White House visit Wednesday with Biden and top infectious disease expert Dr. Anthony Fauci that was heavily documented for social media. Younger people are at lowest risk of adverse outcomes from the virus and have proven to be among the least likely to get vaccinated.

Convince

But another huge group has proven to be an even more vexing challenge: Republicans. The White House has long acknowledged that, given rampant disinformation about the vaccines and the nation's partisan divides, it would have little success convincing the GOP to get on board. Instead, administration officials have amped up criticism in recent days of public officials and social media companies for spreading or not condemning vaccine misinformation spreading among the GOP.

"They're killing people," Biden said Friday of social media companies. A day earlier, Murthy, the surgeon general, warned that false information about vaccines spreading on platforms such as Facebook posed a public health risk to the nation.

"We will not be distracted by accusations which aren't supported by the facts," Facebook spokesman Kevin



Tunisian soldiers help an elderly man to enter the vaccination center in Kesra, 130 kilometers south of Tunis, July 13. As part of the efforts from the Tunisian government to try to stop the increasing number of infections in the country, the militaries were deployed to some cities and rural areas hardly affected by COVID-19 or with a very low rate of vaccination, to vaccinate people. (AP)

Discovery

US to end large timber sales: The Biden administration said that it is ending large-scale, old-growth timber sales in the country's largest national forest - the Tongass National Forest in Alaska - and will focus on forest restoration, recreation and other noncommercial uses.

The US Agriculture Department, which includes the Forest Service, also said it will take steps to reverse a Trump administration decision last year to lift restrictions on logging and road-building in the southeast Alaska rainforest, which provides habitat for wolves, bears and salmon.

A 2001 rule prohibits road construction and timber harvests with limited exceptions on nearly one-third of national forest land. The Trump administration moved to exempt the Tongass from those prohibitions, something Alaska political leaders had sought for years.

Restoring those protections in the Tongass would return "stability and certainty to the conservation of 9.3 million acres of the world's largest temperate old growth rainforest," the Agriculture Department said. It expects to initiate a rulemaking process next month that will include a chance for public comment, Forest Service spokesperson Larry Moore said.

Randi Spivak, public lands program director at the Center for Biological Diversity, said old-growth trees are "carbon-storing champions" and shade salmon streams in the Tongass. (AP)

Ohio towns expand events: A three-day celebration of what would have been history-making astronaut John Glenn's 100th birthday began Friday in his birthplace and childhood hometown in Ohio, even as additional events were announced to mark the occasion.

Glenn, who died in 2016, was the first American to orbit Earth, making him a national hero in 1962. In addition to his military and space accomplishments, he spent 24 years as a Democrat in the US Senate.

The John Glenn Centennial Celebration in both Cambridge, where Glenn was born on July 18, 1921, and nearby New Concord, where he grew up and met his late wife, Annie, runs through Sunday. It includes a parade, the Friendship 7-Miler road race named for his famous aircraft, lectures, museum tours, space movies, biplane and rocket car rides, music and children's science activities.

At Ohio State University, the John Glenn College of Public Affairs has updated seven display cases in Page Hall in honor of Glenn's life, legacy of public service and relationship to the university, which houses Glenn's archives. Items displayed include speeches, letters, diaries and news clippings. The college plans additional events throughout the year. (AP)

Lightning likely cause of fire: A lightning strike likely ignited a 2020 wildfire in California's Sierra National Forest, but the US Forest Service said Friday they

could not determine an official cause of the fire.

September's Creek Fire burned 600 square miles (1,500 square kilometers) and spread so quickly that hundreds of Labor Day holiday campers had to be rescued by a series of harrowing helicopter flights. All 214 campers were delivered safely.

Investigators did not rule out arson and lit cigarettes as the cause, but said there



Spivak



Magsig

were no illegal marijuana grow sites nearby that could have started the fire. Forest service officials said an "undetermined" status is not uncommon with a fire this complex.

Fresno County Supervisor **Nathan Magsig** expressed gratitude for the service completing its investigation but said an undetermined cause makes it "hard for the residents and those who lost so much to find closure." (AP)

Spivak Magsig