Wildfires Raging in Greece and California Prove Climate Change Is Here

There’s no way to sugarcoat it: Climate change is here, and we are living in its burning embers.
First there was Sweden. Then Greece. California.

It’s the summer of heat and wildfires, and extremely weird, violent ones at that.

Wildfires are angrily raging throughout the world, in both places that have become synonymous with them and regions that have never seen a fire rip through before and where people can’t fathom how to fight the flames tearing through acres of land.

The fires are capitalizing on a triple threat of searing heat, jet streams that are tamping down on pressure, and a lack of rain that have made landscapes so dry they transform into flames almost instantaneously. The jet stream, in particular, is acting up, looping toward the pools with high pressure “ridges” but plummeting around the equator with low pressure troughs. That, combined with the unprecedented heat brought by climate change, make for prime wildfire weather.

But how do we know it’s climate change? On Friday, the World Weather Attribution Project released a damning report that argued the sizzling heat and wildfires burning the planet are anthropogenic—human caused, no doubt about it. The pressure systems have a hand, sure, but the heat waves in Europe, a continent that has rarely seen temperatures climb into the hundreds, are about to become a norm.

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What makes each of this summer’s fiery wildfires especially noteworthy is their extremity, the almost otherworldliness of their devastation. In Sweden and neighboring Finland and Norway—regions within the Arctic Circle whose summers are normally characterized by temperate reprieves from bitter winters, with temperatures hovering around 70 degrees and marked by pleasant, idyllic pressure and moisture levels—the heat wave has been so devastating that emergency officials don’t know how to handle the fires cropping up, the people passing out from dehydration, the sheer strength of the heat on withering crops. Earlier this month, Swedish authorities were so overwhelmed by a streak of 60 wildfires that they pled for foreign aid. In the two months leading to the Arctic circle wildfires—a phrase that seems oxymoronic and dystopian in itself—temperatures had regularly flirted with the 90s, and rain was sparse.

“The fires killed people because they had no plan and were in the wrong place at the wrong time.”
That same pounding heat and parching dryness was seen in Greece's killer firewaves last week and now in California. The latter has become synonymous with wildfires but the former had almost rarely dealt with the phenomenon until last week, when wildfires tore through towns and killed over 80 people, potentially caused by arson and worsened by the heat.

Some of that has to do with the fact that both California and Greece are facing remarkably similar climates, despite being half a world apart.

"Mediterranean pine forests and shrublands are naturally prone to the occurrence of occasional wildfires and are highly flammable during the dry and hot summer months," Niels Andela, a NASA research scientist with the University of Maryland's Earth Science Interdisciplinary Center, told The Daily Beast. "The combination of high fuel loads, temperatures, and strong winds have made these fires worse."

What would have been a terrible wildfire has transformed into fireballs that readily wipe out humans in their path. And while climate change's role in the violent fires is not disputed in scientific circles, one other worrisome culprit is becoming increasingly problematic: a lack of planning.

"The Mediterranean is on a drying and warming trend making longer fire seasons and more intense fire weather," said David Bowman, a professor of environmental change biology in Australia's University of Tasmania. "But the social and physical geographic factors are critical too."

Bowman, whose native Australia is experiencing winter right now due to its southern hemisphere location but has become a wildfire target in recent years, said that climate change has been known to be coming for years now. But urban planners have not taken environmental catastrophe into account. Saving lives in the face of climate change is possible, and city planners could be creating easily accessible solutions for wildfires, particularly in the rural areas where wildfires spread rapidly.

But Bowman pointed to the Greek wildfires as a cautionary tale not only because of their environmental position—one that reflects many who have moved as a result of urban sprawl—but also because of their poor planning methods. "Basically there is a sweet spot where you have enough brush fuels to carry fire into urban areas and the housing is mixed in with combustible trees and ground fire—this is actually a sort of wildfire fuel," he explained. "Once in urban areas there is house-to-house ignitions. It is quite possible for fires to burn through suburbs."

In fact, "many towns and cities are at risk globally and most people have no idea this is the case," Bowman warned. "The fires killed people because they had no plan and were in the wrong place at the wrong time. It is possible to reduce loss of life but this is a big project involving community education, changing landscape vulnerability, creating fire safe places, and more."

In other words, it's quite likely to get worse before it gets better, primarily because city codes, their implementation, and resulting architecture are slow processes.

"This is the new normal."

Which makes urban planning strategies that much more important in our now-present climate change world. "The solution is thoughtful landscape design and building/retrofitting houses to resist fire, building community capacity to manage fire as well as firefighting capacity," Bowman emphasized.
That’s because even if it’s already late, it’s not too late, and researchers suggest we have to act before it’s even more dire. From a health standpoint, the effects of the wildfires live on for months—perhaps years. "In this particular instance [Greece], most people likely died because of direct contact with the fire, since one of the several fires was occurring in a densely populated area," Andela said. "However, poor air quality in surrounding urban areas may also take its toll." That leads to issues like asthma, lung disease, and cancers that lie dormant for years before appearing in its often terminal form. That’s all besides the coughing and breathing issues that frequently affect survivors.

What’s especially shocking about the Greek wildfires is their deadliness. A lack of urban planning certainly played a role, but there was also the fact that the severity of the drought and heat that ignited the fire were uniquely powerful and extreme enough to spread rapidly.

"One of the [Greek] fires occurred in a densely populated area and people were not prepared for its sudden rapid spread in response to high temperatures, low humidity, and strong winds," he explained. The areas that were hardest hit were lush with vegetation like grass and bushes, which made them especially susceptible to the wrath of wildfires because of their tinder-like state. And without skyscrapers or hills to help buffer their path, these wildfires became frightening tornados.

"Fire scientists and managers are talking about fire smart urban design but we are so far behind even in notoriously fire prone places like Australia and the western United States," Bowman said. "We have a pretty good idea what needs doing but the ability to do this on scale remains elusive."

That’s not only because city governments are often hesitant to instill these costs but also because the science and understanding of how to build a fireproof community and housing—particularly in areas that experience a lot of drought and are don’t get much, if any, precipitation or are expected to experience huge reductions in water—simply hasn’t happened.

And breathing in air that is dense with smoke and the charred remains of plants and housing is far from ideal for normal breathing. "Think of all the stuff in houses that is toxic when burned," Bowman said. The initial death count often includes people who died from smoke inhalation or burned, but Bowman said death tolls can continue to climb in the days after a wildfire. "Typically, there are a few more casualties after a fire," Bowman said.

Beyond the physical, there is the long lasting “psychosocial trauma” that victims have to deal with, Bowman said: Thinking home was a safe sanctuary, realizing that a fire was ripping through home, causing death and destruction in seconds. Post-traumatic stress disorder is not common, as is exhaustion, depression, anxiety, and more. Surviving a fire physically is only the first step towards recovery; the lingering health and mental effects are debilitating enough to be fatal in their own right.
But that mental and physical hardship is one that many more people will be facing in the months, years, and decades to come, as climate change makes its presence known. The wildfires might seem like they are a glimpse of our future, a warning of the pain that can be inflicted by nature when humans lose control of their environment, but the truth is that their burning isn’t a warning any more of what may come. No, the wildfires and broiling heat, the parched droughts and bizarrely violent twists in climate are the new normal of what extreme weather we can now expect now and beyond. This is the new normal.

“We can reduce our exposure to these events but this will require investment in preventative fire management and social change,” Bowman said. “It is not all about more fire bombers.”

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Rudy Giuliani’s First Witch Hunt

Trump’s lawyer was once a prosecutor himself, and he put three men away on the word of someone far less reliable than Michael Cohen.

MICHAEL DALY  07.31.18  4:45 AM ET

As U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York, Rudy Giuliani happily locked up three Wall Street executives on the unsubstantiated word of
a lone informant who was even less reliable than Michael Cohen.

“A witch hunt,” the wife of one of the unjustly accused three termed the 1986 investigation.

The insider-trading charges against two of the three were subsequently dropped. The third, Robert Freeman of Goldman Sachs, finally gave in to threats of heavy prison time and pleaded guilty to mail fraud in an unrelated case.

His wife, Margo Freeman, was the one who described the investigation with the very same words Giuliani now uses to described special counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election.

The informant in what seems to have really been a witch hunt three decades ago was Martin Siegel, who admitted to selling inside information to financier Ivan Boesky for $700,000. Siegel immediately sought to rat his way out of trouble, accusing Freeman and two others, Richard Wigton and Timothy Tabor, of similar financial misdeeds.

On Feb. 12, 1987, Giuliani dispatched U.S. Marshals and federal agents to the three men’s respective places of work. An arrest team surprised Freeman at his office where he presided as Goldman’s head of arbitrage.

The feds informed Freeman he was under arrest, ordering him to empty his pockets, reading him his Miranda rights, and seizing his Rolodex. A Goldman lawyer convinced the feds to hold off on handcuffing Freeman until he was led outside, but a media mob awaited him at the courthouse. The reporters and photographers and TV news crews had been summoned for a Giuliani press conference that was accompanied by the first Wall Street perp walk.

Another arrest team arrived with Richard Wigton, who had been in tears when he was escorted in handcuffs from his office at Kidder, Peabody & Co., where he was head of risk arbitrage and over-the-counter trading.

Timothy Tabor might have suffered the same treatment, but he had recently left Kidder Peabody to take a job as head of arbitrage at Merrill Lynch. The feds only caught up with him at home after court hours and he remained in custody until he could be brought before a judge the next morning.

Giuliani’s obvious intent was to give the three executives such a scare that they would immediately admit their guilt. They might have if they had in fact been guilty. They retained the resilience of the innocent.

The accompanying problem for Giuliani was that he had no evidence to corroborate the informant’s word that these three had also been involved in insider trading. The charges against Wigton and Tabor were dropped.

But Giuliani was not ready to admit total defeat, and threatened Freeman with racketeering charges under the same RICO statute that had been used against the Mafia. That 1970 law provides greatly increased penalties for offenses committed as part of an ongoing criminal enterprise. Freeman risked long years in prison if he challenged the prosecution and lost. He had already been charged with something he did not do. What could guarantee he would not also be convicted? He finally agreed to plead guilty to a relatively minor charge unrelated to the original case.

Freeman was sentenced to four months. That was double the two-month sentence that the informant Siegel received for actual insider trading.

Lest anybody think Giuliani learned a lesson as he neared the end of his tenure as U.S. attorney, he authorized the arrest in 1988 of another Wall Street figure based on a lone, uncorroborated informant.
John Mulheren was prosecuted and actually convicted, but the verdict was thrown out on appeal. The Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit suggested that the case should have never been brought in the first place.

“We are convinced that no rational trier of fact could have found the elements of the crimes charged here beyond a reasonable doubt,” the court found.

The court cited an earlier case where it had noted, “in America we still respect the dignity of the individual, and [a defendant]... is not to be imprisoned except on definite proof of a specific crime.”

Mulheren was vindicated, but the stress may have contributed to his early death, in 2003, at the age of 54. His pal Bruce Springsteen played at the funeral, where mourners attested to his many acts of philanthropy, which included an annual visit to the Bowery, where he handed out cash to the homeless.

By then, Freeman had been widely recognized as having been unjustly accused.

Giuliani had long since stepped down as U.S. attorney to run for mayor on the power of his fame as a lawman. He lost to David Dinkins, but ran against him again four years later and won.

After 9/11, Giuliani became known as “America’s mayor.” He wanted to become America’s Statesman when Donald Trump was elected, but that was not to be. Giuliani has now become the president’s new fixer.

The former fixer, Michael Cohen, is indicating that he is ready to tell whatever he knows. And Trump should be thankful Mueller is not the kind of prosecutor who hurries to bring changes on the uncorroborated word of a single informant, as Giuliani did when he initiated what really were witch hunts.

Meanwhile, Mueller keeps working in the deliberate and careful way of a prosecutor who is hunting for only the truth, wherever that may lead. Whatever anybody might say about him.

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