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CIVIL PROTECTION FORUM EDITION

INTRODUCTION

Strengthening European resilience: the importance of the Union Civil Protection Mechanism



Paul Rock,
PROCIV Chair,
Irish Presidency
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Europe is facing an increasingly complex landscape of disasters. This year has brought devastating wildfires and other climate-related disasters. More than 700,000 hectares have burnt, leading to 12 requests for assistance through the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM). I want to personally express my appreciation for all responders for their valiant efforts this year, and also to express my deepest condolences to the family and friends of the firefighters who were killed.

One of the progressive measures established in response to these devastating fires is the integrated wildfire risk management adopted by the Council in June 2026. It sets out a comprehensive framework to help Member States better prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from these wildfires. However, it will take a cultural change, driven through education and through adapting land management practices. In this context, the UCPM has become an essential expression of European solidarity and a cornerstone of our collective resilience.

The UCPM provides the practical framework for this solidarity. Through the UCPM, Member States can request and offer assistance, while the EU can coordinate a collective response to emergencies both within Europe and beyond, as seen with responses to Venezuela and Nepal, and the ongoing support to both Ukraine and Palestine. For Ireland, preparedness, prevention and resilience are central to this approach. Investing in risk assessment, early warning systems, training and interoperable capabilities can significantly reduce the human and economic costs of disasters. Equally important is ensuring that lessons identified from previous emergencies are shared across Member States and translated into stronger national and European preparedness.The Irish Presidency would also underline the importance of the people who make the system work. Firefighters, emergency responders, medical teams, technical experts, volunteers and local authorities are at the frontline of Europe's crisis response. Supporting their training, cooperation and access to appropriate resources is an investment in Europe's security and resilience.

Over the past 25 years, the UCPM has demonstrated the EU's capacity to provide assistance to countries affected by major disasters, reinforcing Europe's role as a reliable international partner. As the risks facing Europe continue to evolve, the UCPM must evolve with them, with ongoing negotiations at the Working Party on Civil protection (PROCIV) on the proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the UCPM and Union support for health emergency preparedness and response reflecting this changing world.

The Irish Presidency sees the need for the new Regulation to provide a strong, well-coordinated and adequately resourced UCPM as vital to building a safer and more resilient Europe. The European Civil Protection Forum, on 3 and 4 November in Brussels, is a chance to turn these priorities into practical exchange. We look forward to joining others in the community there as we take stock of the past 25 years of the UCPM, and look at how we can move forward together in the future.

Paul Rock

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PROCIV Chair
Irish Presidency

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CPF DOSSIER

European Civil Protection Forum 2026 at a glance



The ninth European Civil Protection Forum takes place at Tour & Taxis in Brussels on 3 and 4 November 2026, under the theme 'Preparing today, ready for tomorrow'. Held every two years, it is the flagship event of the European civil protection community.

This issue is a special edition of the newsletter: its CPF dossier, on pages 3 to 16, covers themes from the programme and some of the Civil Protection Village stands, and we hear from many of the people who will be speaking at the Forum.

Hadja Lahbib, European Commissioner for Equality, Preparedness and Crisis Management, opens the programme on Tuesday and gives the closing remarks on Wednesday. Each day starts with a high-level plenary session. On Tuesday it is 'A stronger Union through population preparedness'. On Wednesday it is 'From sectoral response to integrated crisis management: the role of civil protection', after a session of stories from 25 years of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism.

Panel sessions and workshops follow, on topics such as risk communication and disinformation, lessons from Ukraine, extreme heat, volunteers, youth engagement, and the role of civil society in war time. The panel sessions in the Plenary Room and in Studios 1 and 2 are live-streamed.

The Civil Protection Village, indoors and outdoors, has 50 stands representing almost 60 organisations. Seven live demonstrations take place on the street that leads to it, including rapid- deployment hospitals and a rescEU vehicle that supervises exercises using extended reality.

A Serious Games Corner offers games and simulations on risk-based decision-making, wildfire preparedness, AI-supported exercises and psychological first aid. They include RESI-PATH, a board game from the RESILIAGE project that helps communities turn resilience recommendations into practical pathways for action.

The Speakers' Corner makes its first appearance, with short talks at lunchtime and in the afternoons. In the UCPM Foosball Championship, each team plays 3 group matches on Tuesday, and the 16 best teams reach the play-offs on Wednesday.

The Forum celebrates the 25th anniversary of the Union Civil Protection Mechanism with the UCPM Medal Ceremony. The Youth Agenda brings 100 young participants from across Europe into the programme (see page 17).

Scan the QR code for the full programme, speakers and live-stream links or visit the Union Civil Protection Knowledge Network website for more details on the 9th European Civil Protection Forum!

From minefields to earthquakes: APOPO* trains rats and dogs to detect danger

By Stephanie Khalaf, Unit B3, DG ECHO



A RescueRAT navigating a simulated debris environment during training © APOPO

In the early 2000s, APOPO, a Belgian-registered non-governmental organisation, began training African giant pouched rats to detect landmines. It later expanded into tuberculosis screening. That expertise now underpins two separate disaster-response programmes: RescueRATs, which are being trained to locate people trapped under rubble, and Technical Survey Dogs (TSD) and Mine Detection Dogs (MDD), which support the survey and clearance of land contaminated by explosive ordnance.

How RescueRATs work

RescueRATs began with pilot studies testing whether rats could locate human targets rather than landmines. The results led GEA Arama Kurtarma, a Turkish search-and-rescue organisation, to approach APOPO about developing the concept for earthquake response.

> 'The potential advantage of RescueRATs is their ability to access and search confined spaces within collapsed structures that may be inaccessible or difficult for human rescuers, search dogs or larger equipment to reach.'
>
> – APOPO

* APOPO (RescueRATs and Detection dogs): European Civil Protection Forum 2026 – APOPO has a booth presenting its work in mine action and search and rescue.



An APOPO dog and its handler during a search in Ratanakiri province, Cambodia © APOPO

The rats, trained in increasingly realistic debris environments, now carry technology-enabled backpacks fitted with cameras and two-way communication. The programme has two complementary capabilities. In search mode, a rat navigates debris independently and performs a trained indication by activating a switch on its vest when it detects a person, which transmits a signal to the team at the basepoint. The rat can then be recalled using a designated audio signal. In survey mode, the backpack's camera and sensors give teams visual information on debris configuration, obstacles and access routes they would otherwise struggle to assess. 'The approach is intended to complement, rather than replace, existing search-and-rescue capabilities', APOPO says.

'RescueRATs has not yet been deployed in a real-world disaster. The programme remains in the research and development stage, with evidence to date coming from training and simulated search environments.' That work, APOPO adds, has nevertheless 'produced encouraging results, helping us to further refine the rats' trained behaviours, equipment and operational procedures, while informing the next steps towards real-world trials'. Real-world reliability still depends on the same factors that affect any trained detection animal: consistent training, debris complexity and the accessibility of the search area itself.

That experimental spirit is central to how APOPO frames the project. 'Innovation and unconventional solutions can strengthen preparedness by opening new avenues for addressing complex problems and expanding the range of capabilities available to responders before a disaster occurs', APOPO says. 'RescueRATs is an example of this approach. It explores how unconventional heroes – rats – can use their innate abilities to provide a new means of complementing existing search-and-rescue techniques.'

Detection dogs in Ukraine and beyond

APOPO's work with detection dogs – known as HeroDOGs in its public fundraising – builds on that same expertise.

Operationally, the organisation trains two types of dogs for distinct roles: TSDs, which investigate suspected hazardous areas to determine where contamination is actually present – searching large areas and vegetation with GPS tracking so clearance resources are concentrated only where genuinely needed – and MDDs, which then carry out the more systematic clearance search. APOPO trains Belgian Malinois for 12 months before deployment, with ongoing testing and accreditation to national mine action standards. 'Safety is central to the methodology', APOPO says. To date, no APOPO dog has been injured or killed by a landmine during operations.

Unlike RescueRATs, this programme is already operational at scale. APOPO established a permanent presence in Ukraine in 2024, beginning with 16 TSDs and 8 Ukrainian women handlers, working alongside the non-governmental organisation Mines Advisory Group and funded through the EU, UN Development Programme, the US Government, the Swiss Development Cooperation and the Government of Flanders. Growth has been steady since: 4 teams and 32 dogs by the end of 2024, 6 teams and 48 dogs during 2025, and 8 teams and 64 dogs today, concentrated mainly in Mykolaiv and Kharkiv Oblasts. Between March 2025 and August 2026, these teams processed approximately 2.54 million square metres and located 22 explosive items, with all released plots already returned to local communities.

> 'One of the main lessons from Ukraine is that dogs are most effective when they are properly integrated with the wider land-release system rather than viewed as a stand-alone solution.'
>
> – APOPO

Ukraine is one of several active deployments. APOPO also runs dog operations in Cambodia and Azerbaijan, and has previously worked in Senegal, South Sudan and Türkiye. Since its first operational dogs in 2018, the programme has searched 36.1 million square metres globally and located 1 371 explosive items, and now has the largest MDD and TSD capacity in the mine action sector, with more than 130 operational dogs and a further 39 currently in training. APOPO is assessing expansion into other mine-affected countries, including potential future work in Laos and Syria, drawing on methodologies already tested in Cambodia and Ukraine.

Across both programmes, the logic is the same: trained animals extending what human teams can reach, see and assess, not replacing them. The goal, as APOPO puts it, is to integrate these detection systems wherever they can make response and clearance faster, safer and more cost-efficient.

From awareness to action: new guidelines to strengthen population preparedness across Europe*

By Farah Soraya Ridanovic, Unit B3, DG ECHO

Europe is facing an increasingly complex and interconnected risk landscape: disaster and climate risks, geopolitical tensions, cyber and hybrid threats, health emergencies, and information manipulation.

The EU Preparedness Union Strategy, adopted in March 2025, calls for a more proactive, integrated all-hazards, whole-of-government, and whole-of-society approach to preparedness. Public authorities and emergency services, citizens, families, schools, communities, civil society, and businesses all have a role to play.

Population preparedness is one of the strategy's seven priority areas. Its objective is practical: empowering citizens and communities to better understand the risks they face, know how to prepare and be able to act when a crisis occurs.

To support this ambition, the European Commission has developed population preparedness guidelines, shaped by evidence, technical expertise, existing practices and consultation with Member States, UCPM participating states and stakeholders, to support a common journey from awareness to preparedness and action, and ensure that preparedness is inclusive and accessible.

Know: communicating risks people can act on

Risk communication helps authorities communicate about risks and threats in ways that people can understand, trust and act upon. This means understanding different audiences, using trusted messengers and accessible channels, addressing misinformation and disinformation, and connecting information to clear actions.

Prepare: getting households ready for the first 72 hours

72-hour self-sufficiency supports the strategy's call for people to maintain essential supplies for a minimum of 72 hours, so that they can manage the initial period of an emergency. The focus is not on creating a single European emergency kit, but on helping authorities provide clear guidance that people can adapt to their circumstances and risks. This can include medicines, important documents and family emergency planning.

Learn: building preparedness from an early age

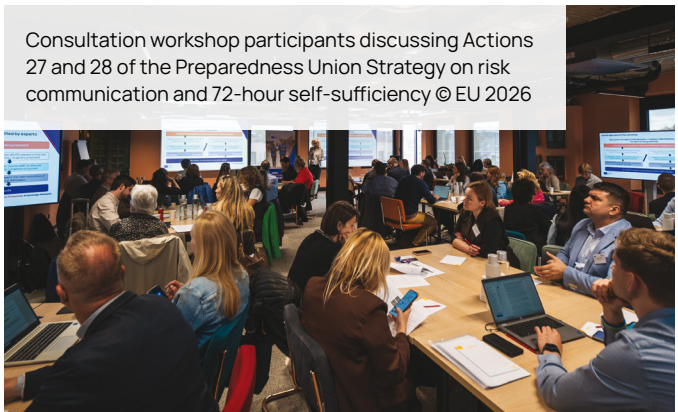
Preparedness education provides guidance for policymakers and educators on integrating preparedness into pre-primary and primary education. Children progressively develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to understand risks and act safely, from recognising warnings and calling 112 to basic first aid. Rather than creating an additional burden for schools, preparedness can be embedded into existing subjects, routines and learning activities.

Include: preparedness that works for everyone

Crises do not affect everyone in the same way. Disability-inclusive preparedness aims to make preparedness and emergency response more accessible and inclusive for persons with disabilities, and to strengthen the capacity of first responders. It promotes accessibility from the outset, including how warnings are communicated, how support needs are reflected in planning and how first responders are trained.

Preparedness as a shared endeavour

Across the population preparedness guidelines, the message is consistent: preparedness works best when it becomes part of everyday life. From preparing households and empowering children to making risk communication accessible and emergency arrangements inclusive, everyone has a role to play. Now is the time to turn guidance into action, bringing preparedness into our homes, schools and communities to build a safer, more resilient Europe together.



Consultation workshop participants discussing Actions 27 and 28 of the Preparedness Union Strategy on risk communication and 72-hour self-sufficiency © EU 2026

* Find out more on the EU Preparedness Guidelines at the ECHO Booth, or the 72 Hours Booth

Interview with Lilyswann Derrien, French firefighter*

By Jo-Anna Van Vlaenderen, Unit B3, DG ECHO

Firefighting is not only a profession, but a sense of purpose and belonging.

Lilyswann Derrien is a professional firefighter and lieutenant with the Gironde Fire and Rescue Service in southwest France, where she heads a fire and rescue station near Bordeaux. She is involved in training and civil protection projects, including international exchanges across Europe. Lilyswann spoke to us about her recent experience of tackling the wildfires in Gironde this summer as well as the UCPM Exchange of Young Firefighters in Warsaw.

'Being a firefighter is also very much about people,' she says, 'teamwork, solidarity, commitment and helping others.'



Lilyswann Derien, a French firefighter, during an exercise in a damaged building at the UCPM Exchange of Young Firefighters in Poland © EU2026

You took part in the UCPM Exchange of Young Firefighters in Warsaw. What did you take away, and are you still in contact with the other participants?

The exchange in Warsaw was a very enriching experience. I discovered how differently civil protection is organised from one country to another, but also how much we actually have in common.

We all face similar challenges: climate-related risks, large-scale emergencies, the need to train our teams and, above all, the responsibility of protecting people. What I particularly remember is the human connection. We were young firefighters from different countries, with different backgrounds and languages, but we quickly became a real group. We are still in contact, and it felt like becoming part of a wider European civil protection community – one of the most valuable things I took away from Warsaw.

You took part in the exchange shortly before the wildfires in Bordeaux, Gironde, intensified. How did the exchange and the connections you made there help you work with international colleagues during the response?

The exchange gave me a different perspective on large-scale emergencies. Being confronted with a major wildfire reminded me that emergencies do not stop at borders. The technical challenges can differ by country, but the fundamentals are the same: communication, coordination, adaptability and trust between people.

The international experience also made me more aware of the importance of sharing information and learning from each other. No organisation can deal with everything alone. Cooperation becomes essential. Knowing that I had met people elsewhere in Europe who understood what we were experiencing created a real sense of connection and a reminder that firefighters are part of a much bigger community.

The wildfires near Bordeaux were described as unprecedented in scale since 1949. What did that experience teach you about the challenges firefighters face during prolonged, large-scale emergencies, operationally and personally?

One of the main things I learnt is that a major incident is not just about the first few hours. When an emergency lasts

* European Civil Protection Forum 2026 – Lilyswann Derrien takes part in the Youth Agenda and speaks at the 'Testimonies and Medals' session on Tuesday 3 November. She is also a CPF Ambassador.

for days or weeks, the challenge becomes maintaining the same level of commitment, concentration and energy over time.

Operationally, everything becomes more complex: resources have to be managed, teams relieved, and decisions adapted to a fast-changing situation. There is also a human dimension that is less visible.

'Firefighters are extremely committed and want to keep going, but they are still human, and fatigue and emotion accumulate.'

One of the biggest lessons is that taking care of the people responding is part of the operational mission, not separate from it.

Prolonged emergencies can have a strong mental and emotional impact on responders. How did you experience this over the summer, and what support do teams need before, during and after a major response?

One of the difficulties for firefighters is that we are used to helping others, trained to stay focused and operational even in difficult situations. However, after prolonged, intense events, responders can also be affected. Sometimes it is not immediately visible, and people may not necessarily talk about it.

'We need to create an environment where talking about emotions or fatigue is not seen as a weakness but part of the culture of emergency services.'

Support can take different forms: trusted colleagues to talk to, professional psychological support when needed, proper rest and recovery, and simply making time to check in with each other.

The most important thing is to remember that behind the uniform, there is a person – and taking care of that person also means protecting the firefighter and the team in the long term.

What needs to be done to attract more young people to firefighting, professionally and voluntarily, and what would you say to someone considering joining?

I think we need to make firefighting more visible and accessible to young people. It's not only about responding to emergencies. It's also about teamwork, solidarity and being useful to others. Professional and volunteer firefighters have different commitments but share the same values.



Firefighters carrying a stretcher through a doorway at a rescue exercise at the UCPM Exchange of Young Firefighters in Poland © EU2026

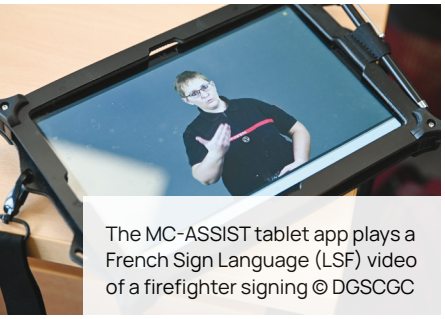
I think it's important to create opportunities for young people to discover this world before making a commitment. Meeting firefighters or visiting a fire station can make a much stronger impression than seeing it from the outside, for example.

My advice to a young person considering joining: don't be afraid to try. You will learn how to deal with emergencies, but you will also learn a lot about yourself and others. It's demanding, but it can be an incredibly rewarding experience.

That's what we need to pass on to the next generation: firefighting is not only a profession, but a sense of purpose and belonging.

Teaching first responders to listen without words

By Stephanie Khalaf, Unit B3, DG ECHO



The MC-ASSIST tablet app plays a French Sign Language (LSF) video of a firefighter signing © DGSCGC

In 2017, firefighters at the Calvados fire and rescue service kept running into the same problem: how to communicate with a deaf or hard-of-hearing person during an intervention, when there was no common language available and no training or tool to help. MC-ASSIST was built to close that gap, developed with firefighters, French Sign Language (LSF) experts, speech and language therapists, and representatives of the deaf community.

'Most of the time, rescuers struggle to communicate with deaf or hard-of-hearing people', says Commandant Mathias Legrix of France's Directorate-General for Civil Protection and Crisis Management (DGSCGC). Writing things down seems like an obvious fix, but an estimated 50 % to 70 % of deaf or hard-of-hearing people in France – around 7 million altogether – do not read written French well.

Responders learning to listen

The approach has two complementary parts. First, responders receive around 2.5 hours of training to understand deaf culture and learn roughly 20 essential signs useful in the first minutes of an intervention. 'Based on these two pillars, they're capable of communicating and carrying out the mission', Legrix says. They can then use a dedicated tablet app to take the conversation further. The app offers responders and victims three ways to communicate – written text, LSF, delivered as video, or pictograms – with 270 pre-set questions covering a rescue assessment from first contact through to handover at hospital. Communication no longer depends on the person being able to read or write French.

None of the tools were built in isolation. 'We worked and are still working with the deaf and hard-of-hearing community, as well as with association representatives', Legrix says. 'That's the key to its success.'

> 'It's precisely because communication is impossible that no requests are made.'

That sentence gets at something Legrix sees as the real barrier. Deaf people rarely call emergency services at all – instead, he says, they tend to organise informally among themselves, aware that responders will not be able to communicate with them once they arrive. Emergency services, in turn, often read that silence as a lack of demand. 'This logic needs to be reversed', he says.

From pilot to nationwide deployment

According to French authorities, the pilot phase involved 19 rescue services and 6 approved civil protection associations, with the approach also tested during the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Nearly 8 000 responders were introduced to supporting deaf and hard-of-hearing people, and 1 384 tablets were deployed across interventions, rescue posts and demonstrations. Since the nationwide roll-out began in early 2026, seven départements have joined the programme, with around 20 % of emergency services now taking part, according to Legrix, and the number is growing.



A deaf instructor teaching sign language to a firefighter during MC-ASSIST training © DGSCGC

Legrix believes the model travels. He met deaf European citizens this summer at the Festival Clin d'Œil, an international sign language arts festival. These people, he says, face 'the same issues in their respective countries'.

'MC-ASSIST is more than just an app', Legrix says. 'It's a tool to learn how to communicate with deaf people, how to avoid counterproductive mistakes, and how to master 20 key signs to successfully handle the first few minutes of the mission. Then, you can use the app to go further.'

What does meaningful youth engagement actually look like*?

By Stephanie Khalaf, Unit B3, DG ECHO

'It involves a two-way relationship between young people and civil protection bodies', says Manuel Aita of the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region Youth Council. 'Young people gain the know-how and experience of colleagues with many years of service, and contribute knowledge of new technologies and modern communication strategies that keep the civil protection system evolving.'

For Güneş Deren, emergency officer at the UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, the answer lies in the word 'meaningful'. 'It means moving beyond engaging young people on an ad hoc basis, and making their participation a structured, sustainable part of civil protection and disaster risk management – seeing young people as partners and contributors, not only as beneficiaries.'

The real barriers to youth engagement

Both point to access as the real barrier. Aita cites 'the lack of real opportunities ... not just acting as observers or handling the simplest tasks but having a genuine chance to discuss ideas.' For Deren, timing is the issue: participation 'can come too late in the process or without clear pathways, from expressing a view to contributing to a decision.' Her fix: 'Creating more accessible, consistent and transparent entry points, and making clear how contributions are taken forward, make engagement far more meaningful.'

Institutionalising youth engagement is meant to close that gap for good. 'It means creating consistent mechanisms for young people to contribute to preparedness, planning and response, rather than seeking their input only when a project or crisis calls for it', Deren says.

> 'It's about recognising young people as actors in civil protection, with both a voice in decisions and a role in putting them into practice.'

The partnership between the two organisations brings together two different starting points to the session. Aita's Alpine Region Youth Council works through institutional channels rooted in a specific region's disasters, while UNICEF brings experience from collaboration with youth-led organisations such as the World Scout Movement, and disaster management authorities in the region, including



Scouts from the World Organization of the Scout Movement packing food parcels for families affected by the war in Ukraine © National Association of Scouts of Moldova

through experiences from Montenegro. 'The partnership brings together complementary strengths', Deren says. 'Youth organisations bring first-hand experience, networks and a direct connection to young people. UNICEF brings experience translating those perspectives into policies and programmes. Together, we can connect lived experience with institutional processes in ways that outlast any single initiative.'

Examples in action

That exchange of practice is one focus of the Civil Protection Forum (CPF) Youth Workshop, Aita notes, with contributions feeding into the CPF's Youth Report. 'A particularly relevant example is the National Youth Table established by the Italian Department of Civil Protection,' he says, 'where 29 young volunteers meet monthly to analyse young people's needs, encourage intergenerational exchange, and propose ways of engaging younger generations using more relevant tools and language.'

On what to change, Aita argues less for reform than for trust. 'What would help, both at the European and the national level, is granting greater autonomy to national and local agencies', he says. 'This doesn't weaken the EU as an alliance – it strengthens it, since each country or region can then focus resources on the emergencies it is best equipped to handle.'

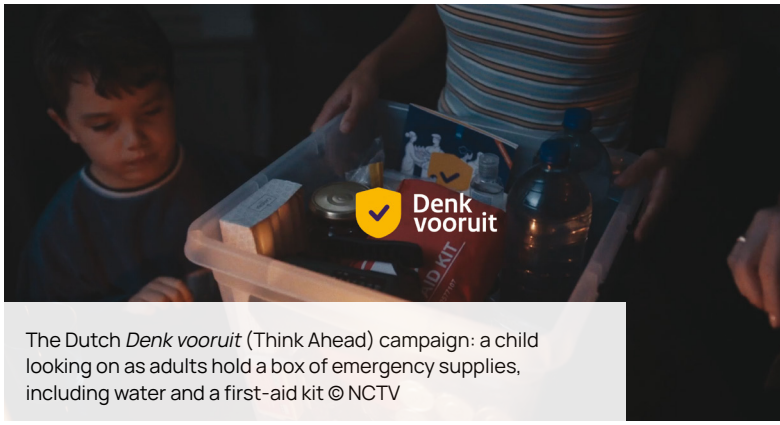
> 'Greater localisation and meaningful participation go hand in hand: the closer we are to affected communities, the better we understand what is needed.'
>
> – Güneş Deren, UNICEF

* Institutionalising youth engagement: European Civil Protection Forum 2026 – the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region Youth Council and UNICEF take part in Workshop 7 'Institutionalising youth engagement in disaster preparedness and response'.

Think ahead: strengthening citizens' resilience in the Netherlands*

By Jo-Anna Van Vlaenderen, Unit B3, DG ECHO

How can governments encourage citizens to prepare for emergencies without creating fear or panic? The Netherlands is addressing this challenge through Think Ahead (*Denk vooruit*), a long-term campaign to strengthen population preparedness. The campaign encourages citizens to take practical steps towards self-sufficiency during the first 72 hours of an emergency, whether flooding, a power outage, a cyberattack or another disruption. Rather than focusing on worst-case scenarios, it promotes gradual behavioural change.



The Dutch *Denk vooruit* (Think Ahead) campaign: a child looking on as adults hold a box of emergency supplies, including water and a first-aid kit © NCTV

Understanding preparedness

Before launching the campaign, the Dutch government conducted behavioural research into citizens' preparedness and the barriers to further action. This produced a 'resilience ladder' of around 80 behaviours, from keeping drinking water at home to completing first-aid training or volunteering.

The approach recognises that citizens are at different stages of preparedness and encourages manageable steps rather than expecting everyone to become fully prepared immediately.

'You cannot immediately bring everyone to the highest level. If someone is not prepared at all, you need to go step by step', explains Josine Quist, coordinating advisor at the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security (NCTV). Tessa Erkendiep, communications officer at the NCTV, adds: 'Having an emergency radio at home is already a big step for many people. There are many smaller steps to consider before.'

The Netherlands also drew on international experience, including from Sweden and Denmark, but found that approaches cannot simply be copied. Preparedness messaging needs to reflect national culture and local circumstances.

A whole-of-society approach

Think Ahead involves organisations across society. Ministries, municipalities, businesses, NGOs and volunteer groups all help spread the message, adapting materials to their own audiences while retaining the overall objective.

'The Think Ahead message was not solely a government message. It truly became a message from society itself', says Erkendiep. 'Without our partners, we could never have reached so many citizens.' In November 2025, the nationwide media campaign The Netherlands Goes Dark simulated a disruption to critical infrastructure. It was followed by a preparedness booklet which was sent to around 8.5 million households in nine languages and multiple accessible formats.

From awareness to action

Follow-up research shows the campaign reached a large share of the population. Around 91 % of respondents reported receiving the booklet. 57 % said they had read it, and of those, 58 % took at least one preparedness measure afterwards.

The evaluation also found challenges. Some people felt overwhelmed or questioned the emphasis on war-related scenarios, while others wondered what happens beyond the initial 72 hours. Younger people reported lower confidence in coping with emergencies and were more prone to anxiety. The next phase will focus more on local risks such as wildfires and flooding, as well as digital channels for younger audiences.

The Dutch experience offers lessons for other countries. Effective preparedness requires cooperation with organisations embedded in communities and a long-term societal effort rather than a one-off communication campaign. 'We are working on long-term behavioural change', says Quist. 'You cannot solve that with a single campaign or one information leaflet. You need a multi-year strategy.'

* At the European Civil Protection Forum 2026, the Think Ahead campaign is presented at the Netherlands' booth in the Civil Protection Village.

Red Cross: volunteers are not an emergency reserve*

By Stephanie Khalaf, Unit B3, DG ECHO

Miriam Alba Reina is a Disaster Management Officer at the Red Cross EU Office in Brussels. Since February 2023, she has led its humanitarian diplomacy towards the EU institutions on civil protection and the EU Preparedness Union Strategy. She explains how volunteers can become part of civil protection systems before an emergency, and what authorities should change first.

What does it take to properly integrate volunteers into a civil protection system, rather than just calling on them when needed?

Proper integration starts long before an emergency. Volunteers need to be treated as part of the civil protection ecosystem, not as an emergency reserve that is activated only when professional capacity is overwhelmed.

This means investing in recruitment, training, exercises and accreditation while defining roles clearly. Volunteers should understand where they fit in the response architecture, and authorities should understand the capacities, local knowledge and community connections that volunteers bring. Integration also requires legal frameworks that address liability, insurance, occupational safety, and access to training. But beyond systems and structures, it requires relationships built on trust and mutual understanding. Volunteers are often members of the communities affected by disasters. They know the local context, understand community concerns, and can help reach people who may otherwise be overlooked.

How do you coordinate volunteers alongside professional responders without creating confusion on the ground?

Confusion occurs when roles, reporting lines, and communication channels are unclear. Volunteer organisations, such as National Red Cross Societies, should be integrated into existing command and coordination structures and participate in joint planning and exercises with professional responders.



Supporting emergency services and caring for evacuated families – Norwegian Red Cross volunteers during the Krokstadelva fire response in July 2026
© Norwegian Red Cross

* European Civil Protection Forum 2026 – the Red Cross EU Office contributes to Workshop 4, 'Volunteers on the ground: effective and safe volunteering in civil protection'.

Authorities also need mechanisms to distinguish between trained and organised volunteers, spontaneous volunteers and affected community members who want to help. Each group can make a valuable contribution, but they require different forms of coordination and supervision.

The objective is not for volunteers to replace professionals, but to ensure that professional and volunteer capacities can work together seamlessly when it matters most.

What does 'protecting' volunteer capacities actually mean in practice?

Protecting volunteer capacities means protecting both the volunteers themselves and the sustainability of the organisations through which they serve.

At the individual level, this includes adequate safety training and equipment, insurance and legal protection, and psychological support. At the organisational level, it means ensuring volunteer organisations have sustainable funding, access to training, and the ability to maintain readiness between emergencies.

Protection is about creating an environment where people can volunteer safely, confidently, and sustainably over the long term. It is also about recognising that behind every volunteer capacity is a person who chooses to give their time, skills, and energy in service of others. If volunteer capacities are not protected and supported, they risk becoming exhausted, unavailable or lost altogether.

What's the biggest gap you see between how volunteers are used today and how they should be used?



Using hand puppets to teach children about mine dangers and unexploded ordnance – Ukrainian Red Cross mobile theatre volunteers at schools © Ilia Smyk from Swedish Red Cross

Volunteers are still often viewed primarily as a response resource rather than as partners in resilience building and social cohesion.

In many systems, volunteers are highly visible during disasters but less involved in preparedness, prevention, community outreach, and recovery planning. Yet these are often the areas where volunteers create the greatest added value.

What would you want civil protection authorities to change first?

The first change to make would be to move from a transactional approach to a partnership approach. Instead of asking: how can volunteers help us when a disaster happens, authorities should ask: how do we build and sustain volunteer capacity as a strategic component of national preparedness and community resilience?

As disasters become more frequent and complex, no authority can meet all needs alone. The most resilient systems are those that enable citizens and volunteer organisations to contribute effectively, safely, and in a coordinated way.

Preparedness as part of everyday life: the Finnish approach*

By Jari Honkanen, senior specialist, Department for Rescue Services, Ministry of the Interior, Finland

A culture built on nature and self-sufficiency

Societal preparedness in Finland has its roots in the country's nature and geography: four distinct seasons, temperatures ranging from +30 °C to -35 °C, and a large, sparsely populated country (an average of 18 persons per square kilometre). These conditions have taught us to adapt, so that everyday life still functions smoothly in almost all situations, without lasting disturbances to services.



Volunteers entering a civil defence shelter during the Suojaan 2026 exercise in Kuopio, Finland, September 2026

Preparedness comes as a by-product when one lives in the countryside or goes to the summer cottage, where the drinking water comes from a well and sauna water from the lake. There might be neither electricity nor a refrigerator, so food needs to be adapted to those conditions as well.

If we put it quite simply: preparedness is thinking ahead, not running to the market or ordering a hot pizza when hunger strikes.

From self-preparedness to community and trust

To support citizens and households in their preparedness efforts, there are 72-hour self-preparedness guidelines for situations where public services and authorities may be unable to carry out their usual tasks, including extreme situations such as wartime. In recent years we have recognised the need for community preparedness – a layer that lies between self-preparedness and preparedness among authorities. The role of civil society is to strengthen readiness in support of the authorities.

In Finland, there are dozens of voluntary organisations whose programmes focus on preparedness for disruptions. Their plans cover anything from accidents, power cuts and searching for missing people to the effects of climate change, such as floods and large wildfires – and now armed conflict. Organisations also exercise these plans, often together with the local authorities such as the police, rescue services and the border guard.

Planning and exercising together in normal times also builds networks between civil society, authorities and public services. Exercising and working together, and getting to know each other, is the foundation of trust. Trust cannot be demanded – it develops over time. Understanding each other's roles creates clarity: we know what the other one can do and is mandated to do. In Finland, we see the citizens and communities as actors, not merely as passive members of the society that authorities serve.

Lessons from Ukraine

Many voluntary organisations are active in Ukraine. They see the reality: how life really is behind the TV news. Volunteers bring back valuable lessons, knowledge and practices that can be applied here in Finland.

Solidarity across Europe

When looking at societal preparedness on a European level, I think we need solidarity. Member States could be seen as one big community, where well-prepared Member States create a prepared and resilient Europe. Preparedness also helps us cope with any kind of disturbance, at any level – at home, at work, in our free time, outdoors, in the neighbourhood or in extreme weather. It is about being able to have a safe day.

* **European Civil Protection Forum 2026:** Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine co-organise Workshop 10, 'Citizens and civil society in war time'.

An interview with MedEWSa: turning early warning into informed action*

By Jo-Anna Van Vlaenderen, Unit B3, DG ECHO



Partners and local stakeholders during a MedEWSa workshop in Limassol, Cyprus © EU2026

Jürg Luterbacher is professor of climatology, climate dynamics and climate change, and coordinator of MedEWSa. The project unites 29 partners from 15 countries, spanning research institutes, international organisations, meteorological and hydrological services, businesses, non-governmental organisations and civil protection.

What was the initial idea behind MedEWSa, and what gap in current early-warning and impact forecasting systems did you want the project to address?

We wanted to close the gap between forecasting hazards, including compound extremes, and understanding who and what could be affected. MedEWSa connects forecasts with exposure, vulnerability and communication through its Decision Support and Dissemination System (DSDS). Eight pilot areas, organised into four pairs, address wildfires, floods, coastal hazards, heatwaves and drought. We strengthen existing capabilities so information can support preparedness and emergency response.

Early warning is about more than producing accurate forecasts. It is also about turning information into action. In your view, what are the main gaps in the warning chain today, from understanding risk and communicating warnings to ensuring people and authorities know how to respond?

The gaps often lie between a forecast, its local meaning and the action it should trigger.

'Impact-based forecasting explains likely consequences, but warnings must also reach vulnerable groups and point to feasible actions.'

People need to know what a warning means for them and what to do next. Trusted communication, clear responsibilities, understanding uncertainty and preparedness arrangements are essential to make that possible.

The MedEWSa project is approaching its end. Looking at the pilot sites and the different hazard contexts, what lessons have surprised you most, and is there a particular example or success story that demonstrates the value of the MedEWSa approach?

What stands out is how much local adaptation matters, even for similar hazards. In the Attica–Ethiopia pair, the National Observatory of Athens (NOA), the International Centre for Environmental Monitoring (CIMA) Foundation and Ethiopian Forestry Development worked together: CIMA and the Ethiopian team implemented fire-spread simulations for three national parks through MyDewetra – a real-time system for hydro-meteorological forecasting and monitoring. Training enabled local staff to run and interpret the simulations – a reminder that transferring technology must go hand in hand with local expertise and capacity building.

Looking beyond MedEWSa, which of the solutions, approaches or lessons identified through the project do you believe have the greatest potential to be replicated or scaled up across Europe and integrated into operational civil protection systems?

The strongest opportunity is connecting capabilities across the warning chain. The DSDS's modular architecture offers a foundation for bringing forecasting and impact information into existing civil protection systems. NOA's operational Attica wildfire service shows clear links between prevention, detection and response. Our handbook provides guidance and warning templates for actionable communication. Together, these approaches support earlier preparation and informed response. Replication needs local validation, interoperability, training, and clear responsibility and funding for sustained operation.

* European Civil Protection Forum 2026 – MedEWSa features in Session 10, 'From forecast to action: innovative early-warning systems for civil protection'.

SparkleFire: using games and play to build wildfire resilience across Europe

By Adriana Solovei, Cathelijne Stoof, Wageningen University

How can games and play help people become better prepared for wildfire risks? This is the main question explored by the SparkleFire project, co-funded through the Union Civil Protection Mechanism. The project aims to develop engaging tools for public education on wildfires. This past 'summer of truth*' once again illustrated that wildfires are an increasing challenge across Europe and are no longer confined to the Mediterranean alone. More creative and effective ways to engage Europe's diverse residents and communities are essential to strengthen preparedness.

The SparkleFire consortium consists of Wageningen University, Pau Costa Foundation, Municipality of Paredes de Coura, Virtual Operations Support Team (VOST) Portugal and Centre for Forest Science and Technology of Catalonia (CTFC). Educational tools that are developed in the project include Sparkids – a Lego-like hands-on learning kit for building landscapes and simulating wildfire scenarios, as well as SparkleCraft – a Minecraft-based simulation that lets players experiment with wildfire prevention and response strategies.

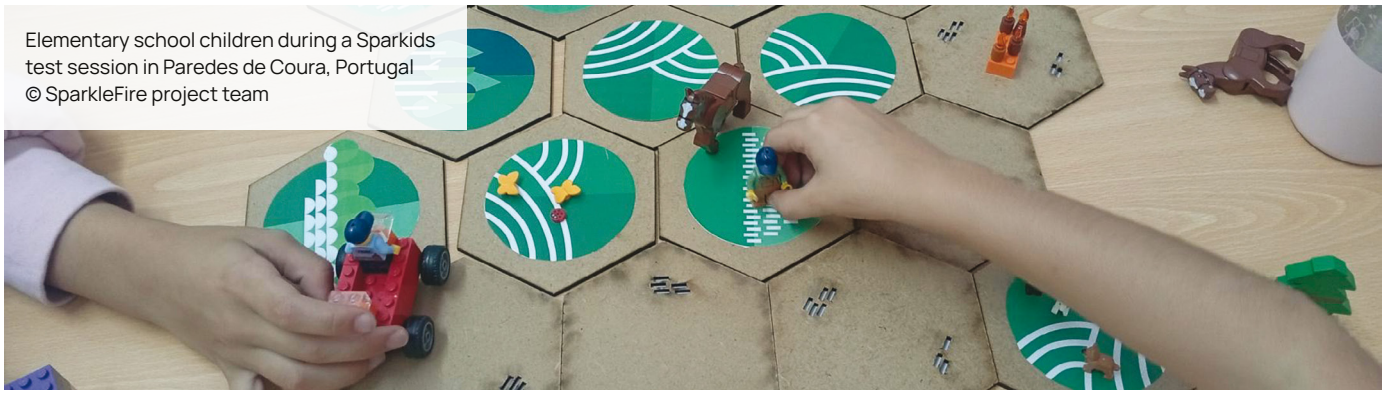
Testing and refining the game

SparkleFire also develops a cooperative educational board game, which was recently pilot tested in different bioregions. Between May and July 2026, 7 pilot sessions with a total of 90 participants were organised in Spain, the Netherlands and Portugal, with testing in Finland upcoming. A diverse range of people took part, including schoolchildren, university students, volunteers, professional stakeholders and experienced board game players. The aim of the pilot tests was to understand how the game was perceived by players and identify areas for improvement.

Feedback from participants was positive. For example, they pointed to the game's cooperative nature as a powerful way to reflect the real-world importance of collective action in reducing wildfire risk. Also, participants mentioned that they gained a better understanding of concepts such as wildfire prevention, preparedness, fire behaviour, self-protection measures and community resilience more broadly. In addition, the participants gave valuable insights and recommendations for refining the final version of the board game, including simplifying the rules, increasing the use of visual elements and strengthening preparedness messages throughout the gameplay.

The final version is currently being developed, along with a digital version of the game and a range of short, simple digital games, each two to four minutes long, covering wildfire preparedness in various formats: from simulating an emergency call, to finding escape routes during a wildfire event and building an emergency kit.

The SparkleFire consortium is looking forward to offering the SparkleFire game ecosystem soon as a suite of freely accessible educational resources designed to support wildfire awareness and preparedness across Europe.



Elementary school children during a Sparkids test session in Paredes de Coura, Portugal
© SparkleFire project team

* European Commission, '2026 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen', 16 September 2026, SPEECH/26/1868, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/speech_26_1868.

Young voices take the floor at the Civil Protection Forum 2026

By Jo-Anna Van Vlaenderen, Unit B3, DG ECHO



A young participant speaks at the EU Youth Policy Dialogue event © EU 2025

Europe faces a changing risk landscape shaped by climate change, geopolitical tensions and hybrid threats. **Young people** are among those most affected by this evolving risk landscape, often facing uncertainty and feeling less confident than older people in their ability to cope independently following a disaster. Yet they are not only vulnerable: they are **essential partners** in strengthening resilience and preparedness. Across Europe, young people are already driving climate action, mobilising communities, shaping public debate, and bringing new ideas and skills to the table. The **European Preparedness Union Strategy** recognises preparedness as a shared responsibility, and young people are part of that. That is why the ninth European Civil Protection Forum will include a dedicated programme for them: the **Youth Agenda**.

A platform for 100 young voices

On 3 and 4 November 2026, the Youth Agenda will bring together **100 participants** aged 18 to 30 in Brussels. Some were nominated by EU Member States and EU Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) participating states, while others were selected through an open call, which attracted an impressive 328 applications. The result is a diverse mix of civil protection professionals, firefighters, volunteers, researchers and representatives of civil society and youth organisations.

What's on?

The participants will take part in the wider agenda, so youth voices will be heard across the programme. Alongside this, the Youth Agenda has its own dedicated activities, including during lunch breaks, when delegates can explore the Civil Protection Village on a guided Youth Walk, try their hand at serious games or cheer on their country's team in the UCPM Foosball Championship. A closed-door workshop will invite the young delegates to share their ideas on how to integrate young voices into preparedness and response at the EU level.

Curious to meet this group full of potential and fresh ideas? You might find them at the **Youth Booth** of the main forum venue. Drop by, say hello and hear what they have to say!

From dialogue to results

The Youth Agenda is the culmination of youth activities run by the Union Civil Protection Knowledge Network since 2022, including the Young Civil Protection Professionals Days (2022 and 2024), the Youth Policy Dialogue on Preparedness (2025), the European Citizens' Panel on Preparedness (2026), where one third of the participants were young people, and the UCPM Exchange of Young Firefighters (2026).

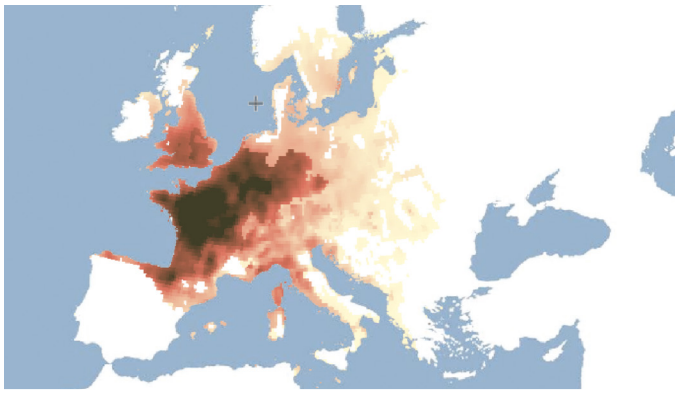
The event aims to foster dialogue and the sharing of good practices between young people, policymakers and practitioners, and to embed youth engagement more consistently at the EU, national and local levels.

Want to know what comes out of it? Stay tuned for the CPF Youth Report, which will follow the forum and capture participants' perspectives, recommendations and key messages.

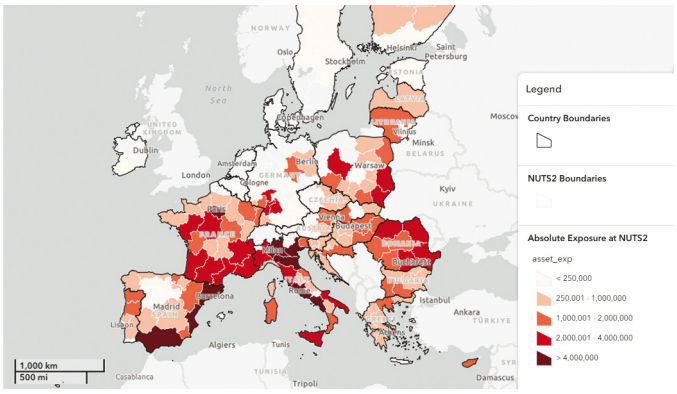
SCIENCE

The hidden economic toll of Europe's heatwaves and droughts

By Andrej Ceglar and Christina Corbane, Joint Research Centre (JRC)



Measuring accumulated warm spell intensity during summer's heatwaves on 27 June 2026 © Copernicus European Drought Observatory, 2026



Tracking EU population exposure to extreme heat between 2000 and 2025 © EU Risk Data Hub, 2026

Heatwaves are the deadliest hazard in Europe's disaster records. The JRC's Risk Data Hub, a platform that centralises and standardises risk, damage and loss data at a pan-European level, recorded more than 240 000 deaths between 2000 and 2025 – about 96 % of all disaster fatalities in its loss and damage database. The 2003, 2022 and 2024 heatwaves each recorded around 55 000 deaths, but estimates of their economic losses are frequently unavailable.

Summer 2026 added to this toll. Several heatwaves hit Europe from May to September, compounding a severe drought. Provisional data recorded 36 000 more deaths than expected between late June and late August. Beyond human lives, the economic cost is harder to assess.

Heat and drought can lead to crop and livestock losses, impact infrastructure and leave forests more fragile. Indirect effects on transportation or water supplies can amplify the initial damage and persist beyond the summer, weakening investments.

A new look at the costs of heatwaves and droughts

A brief and a scientific study by JRC scientists and economists from four EU central banks tried to close this gap. Using machine learning on heat and drought indicators from Copernicus, the authors simulated the short-term economic impacts of climate extremes across more than 1 100 EU regions.

Agriculture emerges as the most exposed sector, with heatwave indicators ranking among the strongest predictors of its growth. The authors trained models on past regional data and simulated a heat and drought event comparable to 2022. The results showed that growth in the agricultural output fell by 4.5 percentage points, especially in eastern Europe where farming depends more on rainfall and may have less capacity to buffer heat and water stress.

The industrial sector proved less vulnerable but not immune. Impacts may stem from water and energy constraints, lower labour productivity during heatwaves, transport disruption and pressures along supply chains. As industry makes up a much larger share of the economy, even modest impacts can lead to substantial economic losses.

From monitoring to preparedness

Heat is a cross-sectoral risk: its impacts vary widely between regions, requiring tailored solutions. Combining frequently updated climate indicators with economic data could strengthen early warnings and enable action before shocks spread.

Copernicus Emergency's Warm Spell Intensity indicator is one such tool. Users can also explore trends in the Risk Data Hub's Losses and Damages Dashboard, as well as single events and AI-generated storylines in the Events Explorer. The Exposure Dashboard is a good addition to show how many people live in extreme heat-exposed areas.

INFORM Warning is strengthening global early-warning systems

By Karmen Poljansek, Joint Research Centre

INFORM Warning was launched at the Data for Peace Forum in Stockholm in June 2026 as a beta version. It is the most complex and most promising component of the INFORM family of tools. It is a global early-warning system that tracks forecasts and recent trends across four dimensions: natural hazards, human hazards, socio-economic vulnerability and vulnerable groups. It turns these into warning signals, warning levels and crisis alerts that show where crisis conditions are likely to get worse over the next 1 to 12 months.

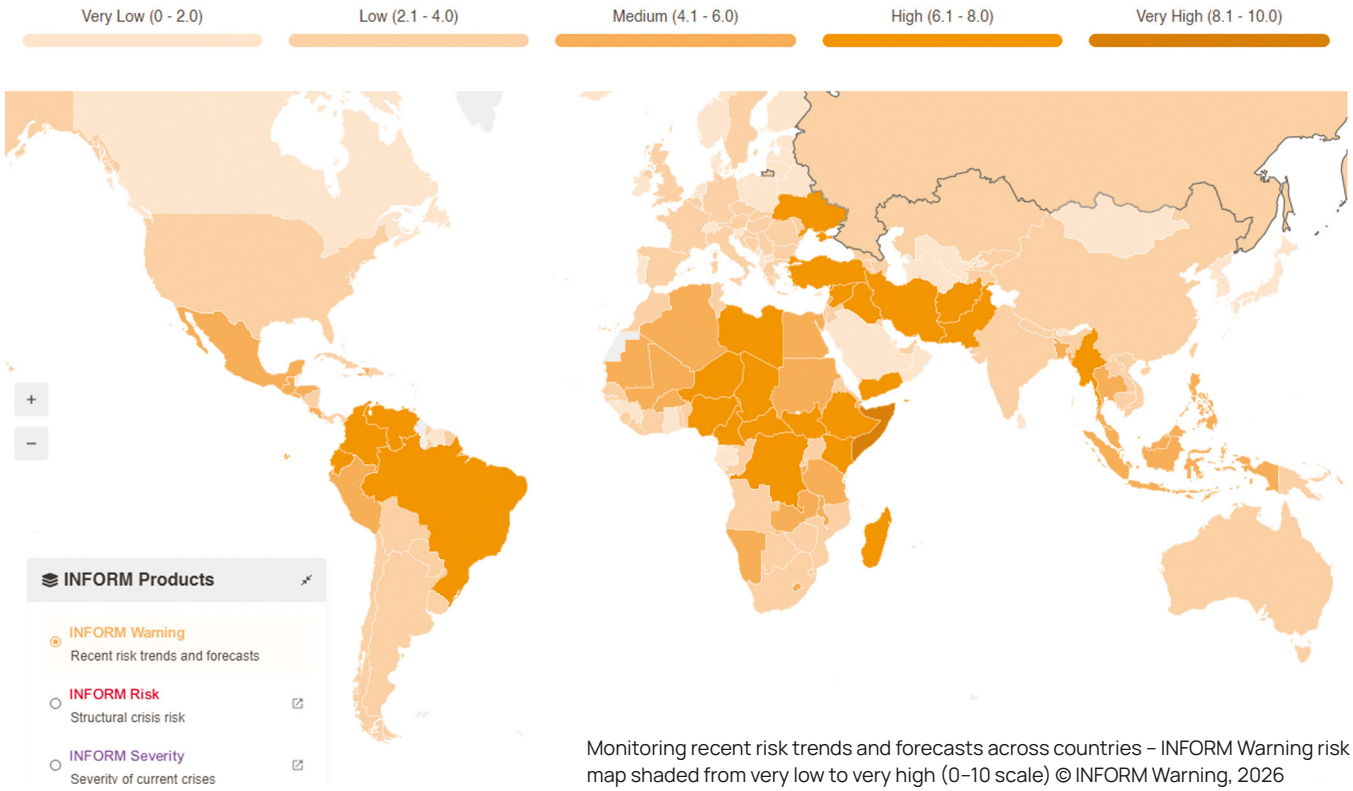
INFORM Warning does not combine many indicators into a single score. Instead, it looks at how unusual current conditions are compared with the long-term, medium-term and recent past, over periods of 3, 6 and 12 months.

INFORM Risk and INFORM Severity then show how much these signals matter for each country. This way, a warning reflects how fast conditions are changing, how exposed a country is and how badly it is already affected. INFORM Warning adds something new to the INFORM tools: it shows what may happen next, not only what is happening now. It is designed to help humanitarian organisations act before a crisis hits, decide where help is needed most, and prepare accordingly.

The system also includes a way to describe how a crisis could unfold, for crises at the highest risk. It translates available forecasts and estimates of how many people need humanitarian help into changes in crisis severity. This turns the numbers into clear explanations that decision-makers can act on.

INFORM Warning has already been used in practice: it contributed to a Joint Research Centre (JRC) report on El Niño. Its methodology is documented in the INFORM Warning User Guide and in the JRC report on mid-term early warning.

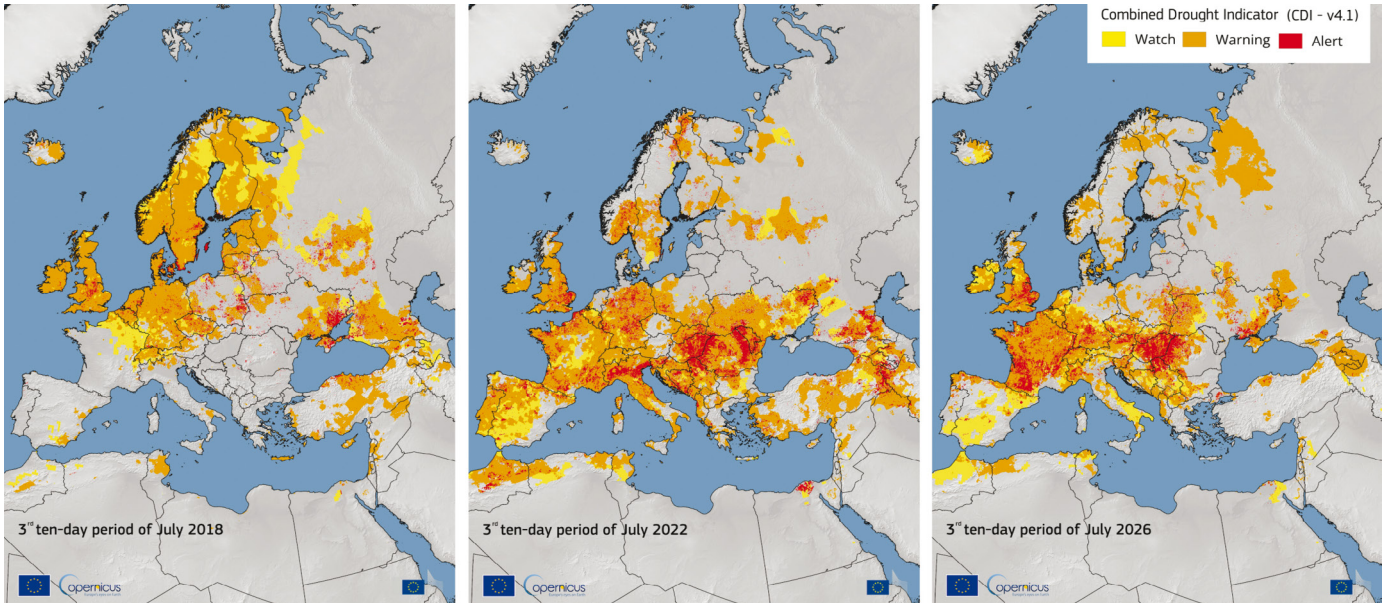
As a beta release, INFORM Warning is still in development. Before it is used routinely, it will go through systematic validation and calibration. This will include checking its warnings against observed crises and adjusting the point at which it raises an alert. The aim is to make sure its alerts are reliable, accurate and useful for humanitarian and development decision-making.



Monitoring recent risk trends and forecasts across countries – INFORM Warning risk map shaded from very low to very high (0–10 scale) © INFORM Warning, 2026

Drought in 2026: from the south to Europe's heartland

By André Moreira (Joint Research Centre, external consultant)



Combined Drought Indicator for late July 2018, 2022 and 2026, integrating data on precipitation, soil moisture and vegetation conditions
© Copernicus European Drought Observatory, 2026

In 2026, drought was more centred across central Europe, according to data from the Copernicus European Drought Observatory.

The year opened with alert conditions concentrated in the south, the Iberian Peninsula, Mediterranean islands and northern Africa. By spring, the picture had shifted. Drought took hold in north-eastern Europe in April and May, and from May onwards an extreme sequence of heatwaves hit large parts of the continent. Lack of rain was the main cause, but the heat made things worse, drying out soils and reducing water flow in rivers.

In June, alert conditions emerged in Austria, France, Germany, Hungary and the UK and by mid-July the World Health Organization reported nearly 10 000 heat-related excess deaths in just 5 countries. By late July, half of the EU and UK territory was under some level of drought, with crops and vegetation showing visible stress. Matching Europe's two most recent exceptional drought years – 2018 and 2022 – 2026 has seen 54 % and 60 % of the EU and the UK under drought.

Impacts across countries and sectors

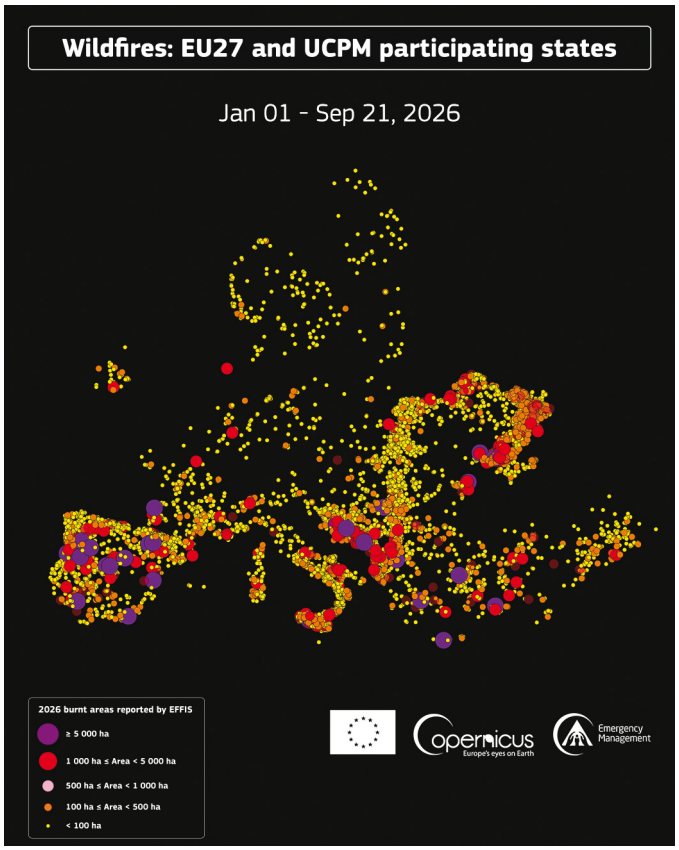
In July and August, some nuclear power plants in France, Hungary and Romania had to slow down or shut down because the rivers they rely on for cooling were too warm or too low. Hydropower plants also produced less electricity.

The impacts peaked in August. The Loire, Po, Rhine and Danube Rivers all reached record low levels. On 16 August, all 10 Rhine gauges tracked by the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine showed low-flow conditions, with 5 in the most extreme class. By mid-August, Italy and Switzerland agreed to release more water towards Lake Maggiore, and several French communities relied on tanker trucks for drinking water. On 24 August, the JRC MARS Bulletin put the soybean yield outlook 14 % below the five-year average.

By mid-September conditions had improved only slightly and remained critical across most of Europe. As autumn and winter set in, rain and lower temperatures may bring some relief. But it is important to remember how drought can build quietly over months and spread across the EU's most populated and industrial regions, straining water, energy, food and health systems all at once. Being prepared for such water-related disasters is one of the priorities of the European Water Resilience Strategy.

A summer of fire: how Copernicus monitored Europe's 2026 wildfire season

By André Moreira (Joint Research Centre, external consultant)



Mapping wildfires across Europe between 1 January and 21 September 2026 © EU 2026

Europe's 2026 wildfire season started early and continued into September. Fires reached the outskirts of Madrid and Bordeaux, spread into regions where large wildfires are rare, and burnt for days in protected peatland. The Copernicus Emergency Management Service (CEMS) supported preparedness and response, combining continuous monitoring from the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS) with on-demand satellite maps of individual fires.

An early start

June 2026 was the warmest on record in western Europe, followed by too little rain and drying soils. The European Drought Observatory tracked drying vegetation, and EFFIS issued daily fire danger forecasts, which authorities could combine with national forecasts to position firefighting crews and equipment, and take safety measures before fires started.

Demand for mapping rose alongside fire activity. By 15 September, CEMS had received 46 requests for emergency wildfire maps, compared with 37 for all of 2025.

What the figures tell us

EFFIS measures burnt area separately. It recorded over 683 000 hectares burnt in the EU by 23 September – well below the 1 026 000 hectares at the same point in record-breaking 2025, but still close to twice the 2006-2025 average. Despite less land burnt than in 2025, more maps were requested from Copernicus' On-Demand Mapping Service.

Closer to cities, further north

In July, fires burnt around 40 kilometres from Madrid. CEMS delivered 55 maps, identifying 2 914 buildings and some 6 200 people affected. Around Arcachon Bay, two fires forced mass evacuations: one was contained roughly 20 kilometres from Bordeaux. A fire in the Fontainebleau forest burnt within about 60 kilometres of Paris. In mid-August, a fire in Germany's Hürtgen Forest crossed into Belgium's Hautes Fagnes, where peat kept burning below the surface.

> 'Wildfires are getting more intense, more frequent and more spread out.'
>
> **– President von der Leyen, 2026 State of the Union Address**

A coordinated response

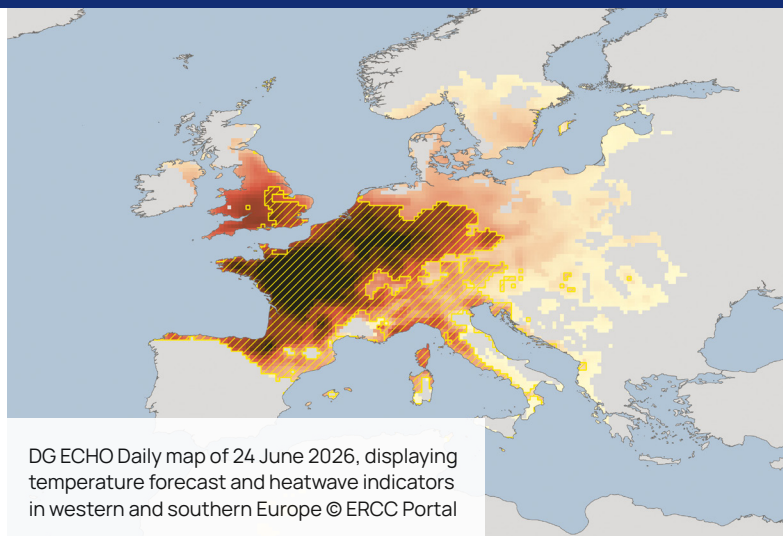
In August, CEMS was supporting authorities in nine countries: Albania, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Montenegro, Serbia and Spain. Through the Union Civil Protection Mechanism, 777 firefighters from 14 countries were pre-positioned in 6 countries, the highest number to date, while an EU reserve fleet (rescEU) of 22 aircraft and 5 helicopters stood by. In March 2026, the Commission called for a more integrated EU approach to wildfire risk.

While 2026 was not a record year for burnt area, it showed how Europe's wildfire risk is changing: earlier, further north and closer to where people live.

FEATURED

Heatwaves are the new normal: how EU early-warning systems can boost preparedness

By Auriane Denis Loupot, Unit A2, DG ECHO,
Anna Battistuta, Unit B2, DG ECHO,
Andrea Toreti, Joint Research Centre, Unit E1



DG ECHO Daily map of 24 June 2026, displaying temperature forecast and heatwave indicators in western and southern Europe © ERCC Portal

The summer of 2026 broke one record after another. It was the warmest summer for western Europe, and August 2026 was the warmest month ever recorded globally. The summer was also marked by a succession of heatwaves that were exceptionally early (starting in May), persistent and intense, with many countries in western and central Europe experiencing temperatures above 40 °C for several days.

Behind these records are millions of people whose lives have been affected, directly and indirectly. Heatwaves have contributed to excess deaths across Europe. They have also affected agriculture, critical infrastructure and ecosystems, including rivers. They have worsened drought, increased wildfire risk and disrupted health, energy and transport systems across Europe. Emergency services have been under unprecedented pressure.

To better prepare for, monitor and forecast heatwaves, the EU has developed indicators and innovative approaches under the Copernicus programme. These measure and monitor the duration and intensity of heatwaves across Europe and globally, and forecast them up to four days in advance. They can also predict the likelihood of heatwaves up to three months ahead. High-resolution products using AI and Copernicus satellite missions to monitor heatwaves over urban areas are also under development. All these indicators and data are free and publicly available through the European and Global Drought Observatories (EDO and GDO) of the Copernicus Emergency Management Service. In the future, information on heatwave risks and potential impacts will also be provided.

During the summer, these data were used by the EU Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) to monitor and inform Member States and the disaster risk management community about heatwaves. Together with Meteoalarm and the ARISTOTLE scientific partnership, Copernicus EDO is one of the key resources that help the EU monitor heatwaves and cold spells all year round. It also supports and complements the analysis conducted by the ERCC's wildfire support team, which monitors wildfire risks across Europe from June to September.

In her State of the Union address on 16 September, President von der Leyen made clear that extreme heat represents a threat for the future of Europe and announced a European Heatwave Plan. The plan could address issues such as better early-warning systems, heat-related health preparedness, urban adaptation and cooling, and support for the most vulnerable. This is highly relevant for preparedness. Anticipating heat risk, enhancing cross-sectoral coordination and planning, reaching people before impacts escalate, and ensuring that services and communities are ready to act are at the heart of preparedness.

Copernicus Emergency Management Service (CEMS) – Drought Observatories

ERCC Portal – DG ECHO Daily maps – Maps

ERCC Wildfire Support Team – Wildfire season 2026: meet the team - European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations

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Wildfires and heatwaves: turning climate risk into preparedness

By José Luis Cruz, Federico Fierli, Philippe Tulkens, DG RTD / EU Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change



Smoke and burn scars from wildfires near the Spain–Portugal border, seen from space © Copernicus Sentinel data

Climate-related risks are increasing across Europe as the continent warms at an unprecedented rate. Heatwaves and wildfires are becoming more frequent and severe, affecting health, livelihoods and the economy.

The 2025 wildfire season was the most destructive ever recorded in the EU, with more than one million hectares burnt. A prolonged heatwave in August contributed to 22 very large fires occurring almost simultaneously in Spain and Portugal. The season also reflected a broader trend: an earlier fire season, more frequent and intense heatwaves, and fires spreading further north than before.

Some regions and communities are more vulnerable than others, but Europe as a whole is still not fully prepared to address these growing risks. For civil protection, this changing risk landscape raises a familiar question: how can we move from responding to emergencies to anticipating them?

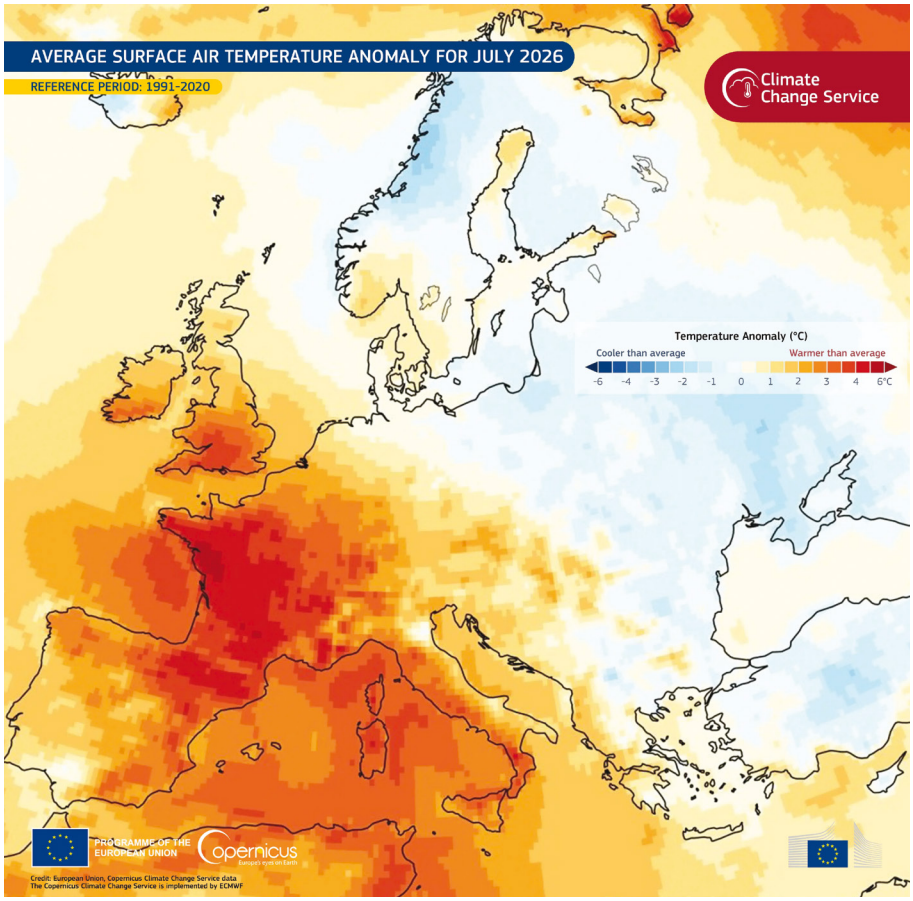
The answer depends on linking climate science, operational preparedness, political will and investment. EU research turns innovation into practical solutions, from observing climate change to improving hazard management by identifying where and when risks may occur and which impacts are likely to be most significant.

The EU Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change provides a framework for working with local communities, helping regions and authorities understand climate risks, develop resilience pathways and test solutions in real-world settings.

Science into action

Improving hazard observation and providing robust evidence for decision-making are central to this effort. The Copernicus programme, through its Sentinel satellites and services, provides observations, models, forecasting systems and applications relevant to wildfires and climate impacts, developed further through Horizon Europe research. These data increasingly integrate AI to make information more actionable for civil protection operations. The Joint Research Centre's Risk Data Hub is one example: it combines data on hazards, infrastructure and vulnerability to identify regional hotspots where risks may overlap.

Heatwaves show clearly why this integrated approach matters. They are not just meteorological or health issues: they also affect emergency services, critical infrastructure, public spaces and the continuity of essential services. Recent analysis points to the need for more granular information capable of showing when, where and how heat risk materialises, and translating this information into actionable municipal alerts.



Average surface air temperature anomaly across Europe for July 2026, compared with the 1991–2020 average. Red areas were warmer than average and blue areas cooler
© Copernicus Climate Change Service data

Research also points to the importance of understanding who is most vulnerable: older people, children, persons with disabilities, low-income households and outdoor workers face very different levels of exposure. Combining heat maps with health, socioeconomic and housing data can help authorities target preventive measures, shelters or support where they are most needed.

For wildfires, the same principle applies: prevention, preparedness, response and recovery need to be considered together. The EU's integrated approach, supported by tools such as the European Forest Fire Information System and the Copernicus Emergency Management Service, shows how satellite observations, fire mapping and early-warning information can support national and local preparedness.

From pilots to practice

Science alone cannot deliver resilience: the evidence points to a need for permanent links between researchers, civil protection authorities, health services, local authorities and communities, backed by clear responsibilities, tested protocols and regular training.

The challenge now is to move beyond successful pilots: adaptation solutions need to be built into local plans, standard operating procedures, procurement, investment and training. The EU Mission's territorial approach offers a chance to test what works and scale up solutions that strengthen preparedness.

Climate adaptation and civil protection are becoming increasingly interconnected. The goal is not simply to respond faster to the next wildfire or heatwave, but to use the knowledge already available to anticipate risk before emergencies begin.

2026 wildfire season: the numbers and stories behind them

By Esther El Haddad DG ECHO, Fernando Sedano, Joint Research Centre

So, what did 2026 look like? According to the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS), more than 700 000 hectares have already burnt across the EU, against 1 million hectares last year. Does that mean we have managed the season better this year?

That is still more than double the long-term average of the past 20 years. Several countries, including Belgium, France and Slovakia, have registered their worst year in EFFIS records, and 16 countries are above their national average for this time of year.

For the first time, wildfire assistance through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) was requested as early as the end of April, when Czechia and the Netherlands called for support. This summer brought exceptionally early, persistent and intense heatwaves, with many countries in western and central Europe experiencing temperatures above 40 °C for several consecutive days. These conditions dried out vegetation, which made fuels more readily available to burn and created ideal conditions for intense and rapidly spreading wildfires. (Read more about heatwaves and EU early warning systems on page 22.)

Here are some of the moments that marked the 2026 wildfire season.

Close to 3 000 hectares were burnt in Belgium – the largest fire ever recorded there by EFFIS, 13 times the 2006–2025 average burnt area nationally for this time of year. It was the first time Belgium requested support for wildfires.

More than 220 000 people were evacuated in France – the biggest evacuation of people since the Second World War.

More than 1 100 responders were deployed in Europe, Tunisia and Chile. Pilots, firefighters and other personnel supported countries on 12 occasions, on the ground and from the air. In total, 24 planes and 18 helicopters were deployed*.

75 Ukrainian firefighters travelled 3 000 kilometres from Lviv to Gironde to support France. Their deployment marked Ukraine's first contribution through the UCPM.

On 22 August 2026, the rescEU helicopter hosted by Romania was deployed to Serbia – the first mission of a helicopter from the permanent rescEU fleet. The fleet is expected to grow by 12 new firefighting aircraft by early 2028 and 5 new helicopters by 2030.



The first helicopter of the rescEU fleet, stationed in Romania, was operational for the first time during the 2026 wildfire season and deployed to Serbia © Slovakia Civil Protection

More than 500 maps were produced by the Copernicus Emergency Management Service supported damage assessment.

These numbers tell only part of the story. Behind every figure are communities evacuated, firefighters putting their lives on the line and countries stepping up to support one another. The 2026 wildfire season did not reach the record burnt area of 2025. It did show how the risk is changing: fires started earlier, and countries such as Belgium requested wildfire support for the first time.

* See overview here: https://erccportal.jrc.ec.europa.eu/ECHO-Products/Maps#/maps/5795

FROM THE COMMUNITY

50 years after Seveso: how the EU transformed industrial safety and preparedness for major accidents

By Helena Saffar, DG Environment

Fifty years ago, on 10 July 1976, a toxic dioxin cloud exposed thousands of people to dangerous chemicals and contaminated vast areas in Seveso, Italy. This major industrial accident led to the adoption of the Seveso Directive* in 1982. Through stricter risk assessments, safer land-use planning, stronger safety management and better emergency preparedness, the Directive shifted the EU from a reactive to a preventive industrial safety culture. Today, it has become a global benchmark, inspiring similar laws and safety standards worldwide.

This law has been instrumental in preventing major industrial accidents involving dangerous substances, as well as in strengthening preparedness to respond when accidents occur. The Seveso Directive also ensures public access to information, enabling people to understand the risks posed by nearby industrial activities and know how to react in case of incidents. This kind of preparation for emergencies is essential to safeguarding local populations and protecting the environment.

Europe now faces evolving risks linked to climate change, digitalisation and the energy transition. The increased use of industrial batteries, hydrogen and ammonia can cause fires, explosions or toxic releases. Natural hazards – such as floods, wildfires and storms – could also trigger technological accidents (known as natech incidents). This challenging context calls for capacity-building and awareness-raising, alongside the exchange of information and lessons learnt from past accidents.

Cooperation among industrial operators and competent authorities – across Member States and with partners outside the Union – contributes to the EU Preparedness Union Strategy. This strategy stresses the need for comprehensive risk assessments that cover all threats and hazards across every sector. This integrated approach helps the EU better manage risks, prepare for crises and protect Europeans.



A worker in protective clothing putting up warning signs in the contaminated zone around Seveso, Italy, after the chemical plant accident of July 1976

Thanks to the Seveso Directive, industrial accidents in the EU have dropped over the years. Nevertheless, large-scale chemical incidents cannot be excluded. If a Member State affected by an accident needs assistance, it may request support from the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM). The UCPM can mobilise specialised teams and equipment, including dedicated chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear response capacities.

'Since the accident 50 years ago, the Seveso III Directive has evolved and strengthened our security. Today, it is still fit for purpose. However, the Commission will continue closely monitoring the implementation of the Directive and evaluate future needs. Despite great positive trends, every accident is still one too many.'

– Eric Mamer, Director-General for the Environment

* Directive - 2012/18 - EN - Seveso III - EUR-Lex

Is Europe ready for a changing vector-borne disease landscape?

By Alberto Antonacci and Antonio Mittelstadt, DG HERA



Florika Fink-Hooijer, Director-General of the European Commission's Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority, at Singapore's National Environment Agency's Mosquito Production Facility © EU 2026

The buzz of a mosquito is nothing out of the ordinary to many. But across Europe, that familiar sound is taking on a new meaning. As our climate changes, disease-transmitting mosquitoes and ticks are appearing in places where they have never been seen before, while longer transmission seasons are increasing the risk of diseases such as dengue, chikungunya and West Nile virus.

These changes are part of a wider public-health challenge. Vector-borne diseases –those carried by mosquitoes, ticks and other organisms – already cause more than 700 000 deaths worldwide every year, according to the World Health Organization.

As temperatures rise, these vectors are moving into areas that were once too cold for them. For example, the Asian tiger mosquito (*Aedes albopictus*) can transmit dengue and chikungunya and has spread steadily northwards.

As the risk of these diseases becomes a growing concern in Europe, preparing for outbreaks is increasingly important. Preparation starts long before the first patient becomes ill.

Strengthening preparedness

Surveillance is essential for monitoring vectors, identifying new risks and detecting infections early, while vector control helps limit the spread of disease. But these measures may not be sufficient on their own. Preparedness also means having the right medical countermeasures (MCMs) available.

Significant gaps remain, including limited availability of vaccines, specific treatments and rapid diagnostic tools. Dengue is one example: there is still no specific treatment available. However, promising developments are underway, including a phase III clinical trial for a potential dengue treatment, supported by the Directorate-General for Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (DG HERA) and expected to begin in 2027. Closing these gaps requires continued investment in research, innovation and EU preparedness.

The European Commission is working with Member States to anticipate and address these challenges. This includes a dedicated preparedness roadmap for vector-borne diseases, alongside actions to strengthen vector detection, surveillance and control across Europe.

Diseases do not stop at national borders, and neither do the vectors that carry them. Europe must therefore work together to ensure that the right tools are available before an outbreak occurs.

'Climate change is altering where and when vector-borne diseases can spread in Europe. We need to be ready for that. Surveillance and vector control are important, but we also need the right vaccines, treatments and diagnostic tools to respond when they are needed', said Ana Burgos Gutierrez, head of HERA's Threats & MCM Intelligence, Innovation & Funding unit.

External links

Vector-borne diseases - Public Health - European Commission

SUNSHINE: supporting European disaster resilience through EU Space data and services

By the SUNSHINE Team

Europe's risk landscape is changing quickly, with hazards occurring more frequently and becoming more intense. The authorities responding to these hazards depend on fast, reliable information. Space-based data is now essential for providing it, for example, by showing the extent of a flood within hours of a disaster or disseminating warnings to the public when mobile networks are down. The remaining step is operational: integrating these capabilities into the procedures and routines of national authorities.

SUNSHINE was designed with those objectives in mind. The European Parliament identified the need to strengthen training on EU Space services across Member States, which was later confirmed by the Council of the European Union. Substantial investment has gone into advanced space capabilities, yet many authorities still struggle to access these services and use them effectively in their daily operations.

'The EU Space Programme already provides civil protection authorities and disaster risk management coordinators with a wide range of data and services. However, space assets only make a difference when the people responding know how to use them effectively. With SUNSHINE, our aim has been to train civil protection professionals across the European Union to make the most of these services during disasters and hazardous events, and to support their integration into national workflows.'

– Charly Faradji, SUNSHINE project manager at Telespazio France

The project is coordinated by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (DG DEFIS), in close cooperation with the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO). It works to close that gap and make EU Space assets operationally meaningful. Its activities follow the objectives of the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) and the EU disaster resilience goals (DRGs), strengthening how authorities anticipate, prepare for and respond together to disasters.



Participants during the SUNSHINE 4th Training Seminar on EU Space Data and Services for Disaster Resilience, Zagreb, Croatia, 23–26 June 2026
© SUNSHINE Project



National civil protection experts taking part in the 1st SUNSHINE Simulation Exercise (SIMEX) in Brussels © SUNSHINE Project

The approach was deliberately practical. Between November 2025 and June 2026, four training seminars in Tallinn, Strasbourg, Timișoara and Zagreb brought together almost 100 participants from 18 countries.

Alongside the seminars, three technical webinars covered mapping and early-warning products from the Copernicus Emergency Management Service (CEMS), the Galileo Emergency Warning Satellite Service (EWSS), secure satellite communication through GOVSATCOM, the future IRIS² constellation and Space Situational Awareness (SSA), which monitors space-based hazards.

Two simulation exercises at the European Commission in Brussels – one held in March and another planned for October 2026 – will enable professionals to apply EU Space data and services in realistic emergency scenarios.

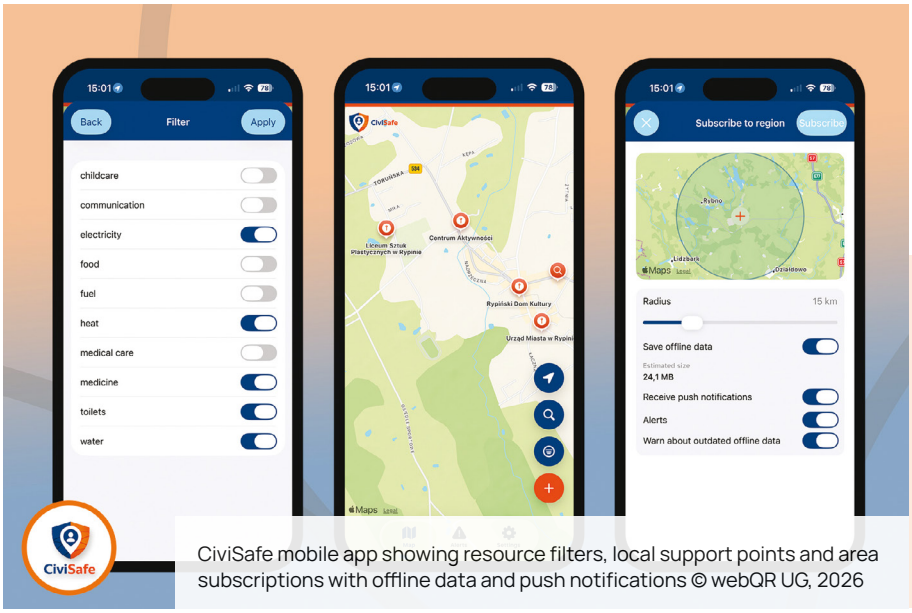
What remains is a network. Graduates return to their institutions as focal points and ambassadors for EU Space data and services, linked to national delegates in the European Commission's expert group for early-warning and alert tools. SUNSHINE builds people's knowledge, practical skills and operational integration, turning EU Space data and services into a resource civil protection can count on when every second counts.

Recordings, slides and training materials are available on the SUNSHINE page of the UCP Knowledge Network.
For enquiries: sunshine@telespazio.com

The SUNSHINE consortium comprises Telespazio France, ALSO Space, CNES, Edelweiss Resilience, EENA, FDC, IABG and UNISTRA-SERTIT.

Making local preparedness visible: the CiviSafe approach

By Janine Faltynski, webQR UG, Marta Żołnowska, webQR UG



CiviSafe mobile app showing resource filters, local support points and area subscriptions with offline data and push notifications © webQR UG, 2026

Local authorities or authorised operators can also share updates about specific locations. For example, residents can be informed when drinking water, food, charging facilities or other support become available at a particular point.

'Our aim is not to create another warning system. We want to help municipalities make the preparedness structures they already have visible, understandable and practically usable for citizens.'

– Janine Faltynski, webQR UG

Preparedness is not only about knowing that a crisis might happen. It is about knowing where to find reliable information, support and essential services in your local area – both before and during an emergency.

This is exactly the challenge behind CiviSafe, a digital solution created by webQR UG in Herford, Germany, designed for municipalities, civil protection organisations and local preparedness structures.

CiviSafe helps authorities make verified local protection, supply and information points visible to the public. Depending on local needs, these may include emergency meeting points, drinking water locations, warming centres, charging points, medical support stations or official information points.

Citizens can subscribe to areas relevant to them, including places where they live and work or where their family members spend time. Information about these areas can then be made available through local channels, including content downloaded to users' devices in advance.

CiviSafe is not meant to replace established warning systems. Warning systems alert the population to threats. CiviSafe answers different questions: what practical options and official resources are available locally – and where exactly can citizens find them?

Across Europe, the conversation on preparedness highlights how crucial local resilience, trustworthy information and cooperation between authorities and citizens have become. For CiviSafe, this raises an important question: how can digital tools strengthen existing civil protection structures without duplicating them?

CiviSafe is currently exploring cooperation with municipalities, civil protection stakeholders and partners in Germany and Poland.

Find more information on CiviSafe.

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COMING UP

Save the date: RASTOOL-DoS Training Day 17 February 2027, Florence (hybrid)



The RASTOOL-DoS (European Ground Motion Risk Assessment Tools – Downstream Service) project is pleased to announce its Training Day, taking place online and in Florence, Italy, on **17 February 2027**.

RASTOOL-DoS is developing a new ground motion analysis service within the Copernicus Emergency Management Service, turning satellite data into maps that help civil protection authorities and geological surveys identify and monitor ground motion and assess its impact on buildings and infrastructure.

The Training Day will present the service to civil protection authorities, geological survey organisations, infrastructure managers and related EU projects. The full programme and registration details will be announced soon.

Save the date!

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

We Act as One: putting disaster preparedness in the spotlight

Behind every effective emergency response, there is preparedness. From risk monitoring and early warning to training and cross-border cooperation, all make a difference when disaster strikes.

This is the message behind DG ECHO's We Act as One campaign, launched in September 2026. Through the stories of seven civil protection professionals from Bulgaria, Germany, France, Croatia, the Netherlands, Poland and Romania, the campaign highlights the importance of preparedness among responders in order to save lives and reduce the impact of disasters, and the EU's role in supporting and coordinating preparedness efforts across Europe.

It aims to raise public awareness of the work that takes place behind the scenes, showing how countries prepare together, share expertise and strengthen their capacity to face disasters through European cooperation and solidarity.



The We Act as One campaign visual, launched in September 2026
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Discover the campaign and help us spread the word using our multiplier kit! (Materials are available in several languages.)

European Union

Union Civil Protection Knowledge Network



Want to keep up to date about events in civil protection and disaster risk management?

Then check out the events section on the Knowledge Network online platform.

European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations – Union Civil Protection Knowledge Network

Email: ECHO-CP-Knowledge-Network@ec.europa.eu
Website: https://civil-protection-knowledge-network.europa.eu

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