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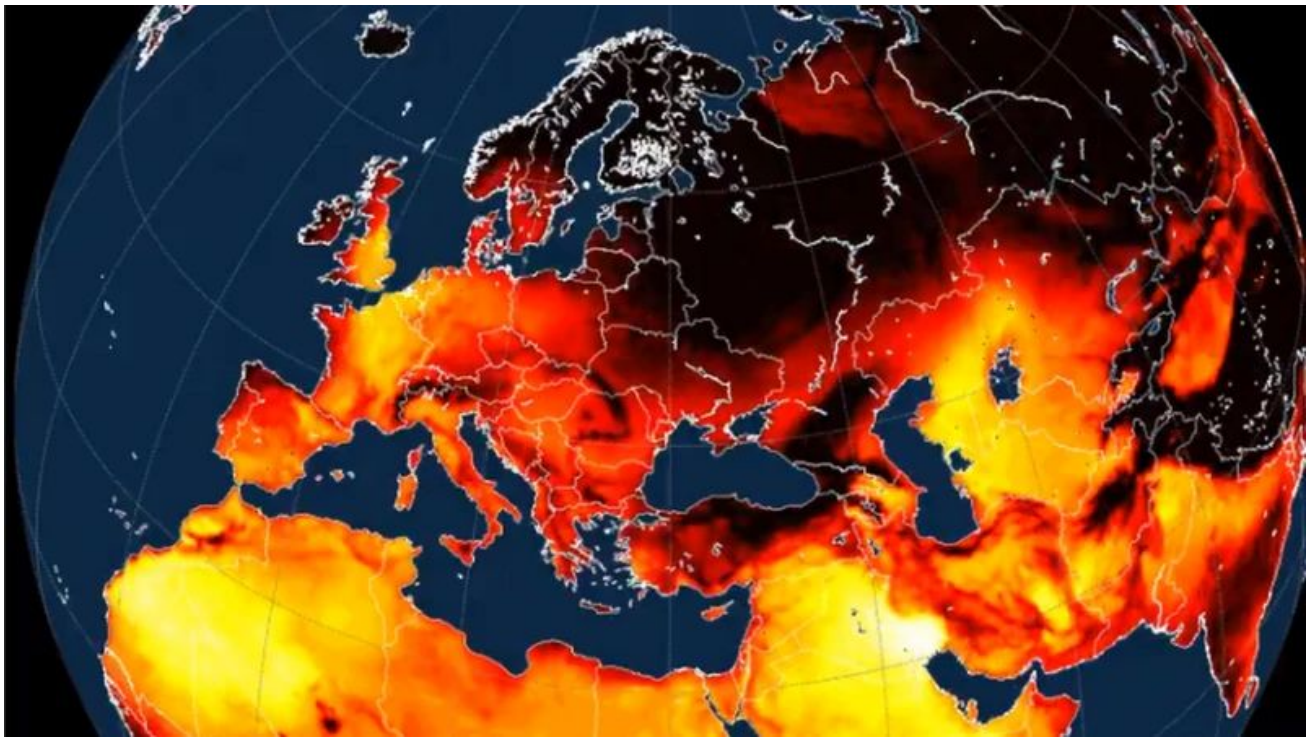
Europe’s fiercest recorded heat wave buckles highways and rail lines

Officials warned of more deaths as temperatures soared up to 18C above normal and hospitals faced mounting strain

Friday, June 26, 2026



Health authorities across Europe remained on high alert Friday as an extreme heat wave moved east and south across the continent, bringing alcohol bans and canceled public events in France, damaged highways in Germany and warped rail lines in Sweden.

Reuters reported that scientists described the episode, which began on June 20, as the most severe heat wave ever recorded in Europe. Temperatures have run as much as 18C above seasonal averages, according to the Reuters Climate Monitor, as a weather pattern known as an Omega block trapped hot air over large parts of the region.

In Germany, extreme heat caused the surface of the A2 motorway to buckle and rupture across several lanes Thursday evening. In Sweden, a cargo train derailed late Thursday after high temperatures warped the tracks, halting traffic between Stockholm and Gothenburg. Austria's national rail company also warned that tracks could buckle in the coming days.

France and Britain were among the countries seeing temperatures peak, with June records broken in both. Paris reached 40.9C on Wednesday, a record for the month. In Italy, forecasters expected the heat to intensify into the weekend, with the first 40C readings of the summer.

French authorities prepared for more deaths even as temperatures were expected to ease. "There will be consequences in terms of the number of additional deaths," French Health Minister Stephanie Rist told reporters.

Patrick Pelloux, a doctor with Paris emergency services and president of the association of French emergency room doctors, told Reuters that 55 people died while under the care of emergency health services in Paris over a 24-hour period. "Fifty-five is enormous," he said. "Normally it's three or four over 24 hours. It's really excess deaths (due to the heatwave), that is clear."

Police in Paris asked organizers of major events, including the Solidays music festival, to cancel. Organizers of the Pride festival said they would reschedule. In Belgium, a planned reenactment this weekend of the 1815 Battle of Waterloo was canceled because of the heat.

Britain's Met Office extended a red heat alert covering much of southern and eastern England into a third day for the first time. A temperature of 36.9C set a new British record for the hottest June day for a third straight day. Hundreds of schools remained closed, London emergency services said calls for help were up 50%, and police said a

teenage boy died after entering a lake in central England.

The Netherlands also issued a red alert for almost the entire country, with temperatures up to 40C expected and many schools closed.

Hospitals across parts of Europe reported growing strain. Hilary Williams, clinical vice president of Britain's Royal College of Physicians, said overcrowding and heat in hospital wards were putting patients, staff and infrastructure under severe pressure. She told BBC Radio that some critical equipment, including MRI scanners and cancer treatment machines, was being affected by high temperatures.

French doctors and hospital workers also reported more emergency calls and treatments.

The World Meteorological Organization said the heat wave, which spread from the Iberian Peninsula into Western Europe, is expected to shift toward central Europe and the Balkans by the end of the month.

Scientists with World Weather Attribution said the record-breaking event would have been "virtually impossible" without human-caused climate change. They said this week's unusually hot nighttime temperatures were now 100 times more likely than they would have been two decades ago. John Kennedy, head of climate information at the WMO, said overnight temperatures staying above 22C were especially dangerous because they prevent the body from recovering from daytime heat.

The effects have extended beyond health systems. Cultural landmarks have closed, farms have suffered and demand for cooling equipment has surged. In Britain, electric fans sold out quickly, while Asian air-conditioning manufacturers reported stronger sales in Europe. EDF, France's state-owned power utility, said it would spend EUR80 million, or about $90 million, on cooling systems for schools and day-care centers.

The International Energy Agency said in data released in July 2025 that household air-conditioning ownership in Europe remained low at around 20%, leaving many homes poorly equipped for prolonged extreme heat.

For beverage producers and distributors, the heat wave may create added pressure on transport networks as damaged roads and rail disruptions slow deliveries. Restrictions on public drinking in parts of France could also curb some sales in outdoor hospitality settings if limits remain in place during peak summer demand.