CLIMATE FACT CHECK: AUGUST 2026 EDITION

Debunking claims of climate links to wildfires, hottest month, water crises & Nepal flooding

August 26th: The landslide in Nepal had little to do with climate change

SCI AM

Claim: On the morning of August 26th, a large ice-and-rock mass detached from the north face of Langtang Lirung (the highest peak of the Langtang Himal) in Nepal that fell about 1.2 km to the valley floor. It generated seismic shaking first mistaken for a magnitude-5.2 earthquake (later identified by the USGS as being caused by the landslide itself). The landslide caused a catastrophic debris flow and flood that traveled nearly 100 km, wiping out towns and killing hundreds of people along the Lende Kholā and Trishulī Kholā rivers. Predictably, numerous media outlets, including *The New York Times* and *NPR*, have pinpointed climate change as the cause for the ice calving.

Fact-Check: The Himalaya is an exceptionally steep and tectonically active mountain range where earthquakes trigger landslides and avalanches, and glaciers collapse fairly regularly. In April 2015, a magnitude-7.8 earthquake caused a devastating avalanche on Langtang Lirung's south face. Frequent seismic shaking fractures glaciers and creates unstable crevasses, seracs, and hanging ice, while Langtang's north face is particularly vulnerable because of its extreme topography. Although warming and subsequent surface melt can and do affect glacier stability, seasonal air temperature changes generally penetrate only the upper 10–20 meters of ice, whereas the basal conditions are largely controlled by geothermal heat, friction, pressure, and bedrock geology. Landslides and avalanches in Nepal have happened for millions of years; that's how its V-shaped valleys were carved out. Peer-reviewed research also shows that the Himalaya were also warmer than today throughout much of the Holocene. Attributing this individual avalanche to anthropogenic warming requires evidence beyond the existence of a regional warming trend.

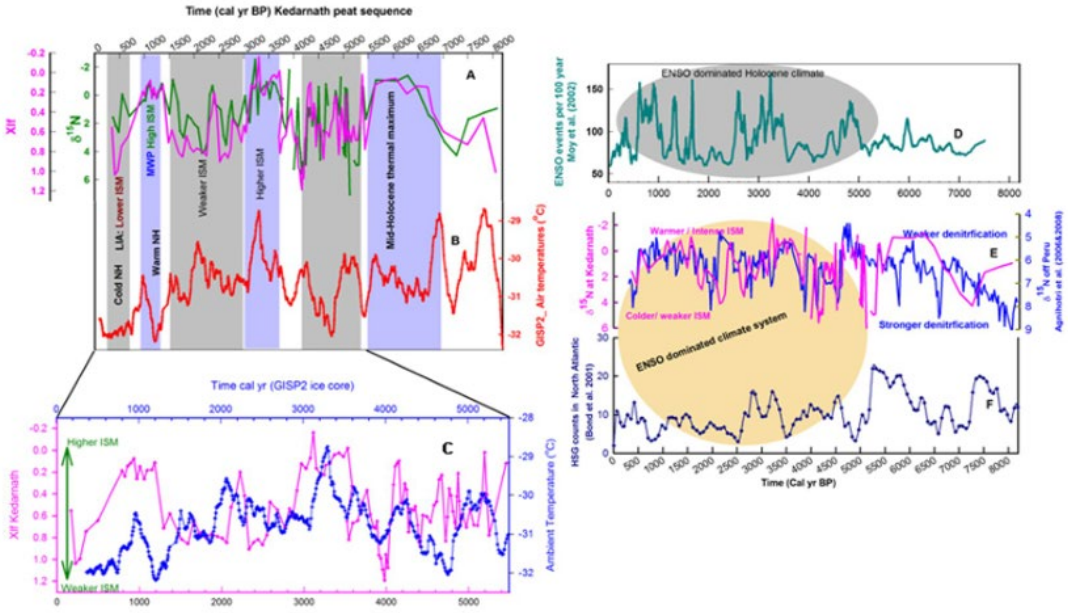


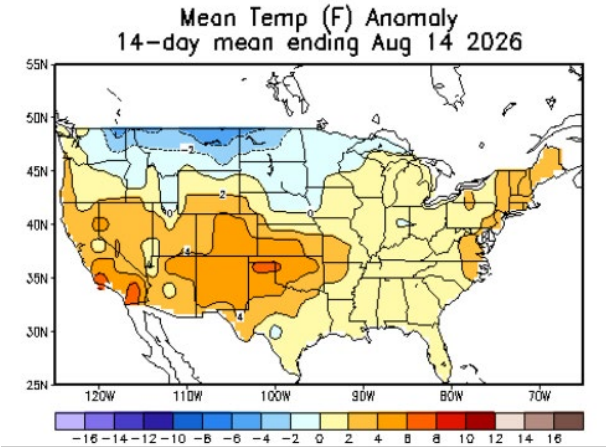
Figure 3. Comparison of Kedarnath's proxy-based ISM variability with contemporary palaeo-climatic records recovered from diverse geographic locations. (**A**) $\delta^{15}N$ and magnetic susceptibility (χlf) records show compelling resemblance with (**B**) air-temperature variability recorded at GISP2 ice core at Greenland. (**C**) Similarity between the two records is more conspicuous since mid-Holocene (~5500 yr BP), where a −200 yr a constant offset was applied to age-depth model of Kedarnath peat sequence. (**D**) ENSO events per 100 year recorded in a Peruvian-lake showing dominance of ENSO system since mid-Holocene. (**E**) Covariance between d ^{15}N patterns of Kedarnath peat-sequence and those recorded at Peru-margin (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2006), noticeable arrival of high- frequency oscillations since mid-Holocene. (**F**) Hematite stained grains (HSG) counts in north Atlantic showing 'Bond events' indicating a significant change in the system at ~5.5 ka BP.

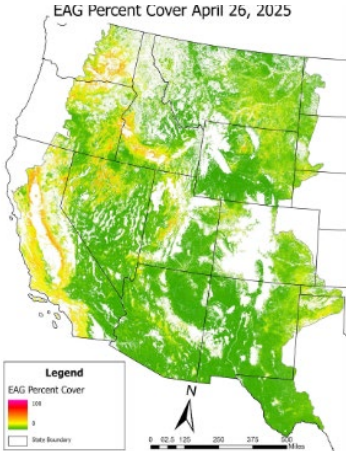
August 3rd: No, *Scientific American*, Spokane's fires don't prove climate change is putting the U.S. at risk of urban conflagration

Claim: *Scientific American's* Mary Randolph writes that Spokane just saw "the worst wildfires in the state's history," with Washington already near 450,000 acres burned this summer, and that rising heat and drought mean "large urban conflagrations are a much more widespread worry." Dr. Erica Smithwick, a "climate scientist" at Penn State, says more of the country now has ignition, fuel, and dry conditions "as the climate changes because of the burning of fossil fuels."

Fact-Check: The Spokane area fires burned 10,363 acres and destroyed 846 structures from August 1–19th; this was a local disaster, not Washington's largest fire event. The July–August 2014 Carlton Complex Fire incinerated 256,108 acres, and 1.14 million acres were torched statewide in 2015. As for this year's Spokane fires, authorities arrested Aaron Farinacci in connection with the Old Trails Fire; court records show he admitted to planning it and setting other fires. While the western U.S. is in drought and dry conditions can increase fire risk, peer-reviewed research shows little correlation between fire burn area and temperature. Even so, at the time area fires were ablaze, temperatures in eastern Washington were running below average.

Perhaps most importantly, the increase in fire risk in the Columbia River Basin is being driven by the invasion of highly flammable, invasive cheatgrasses, which have made the landscape a tinderbox.

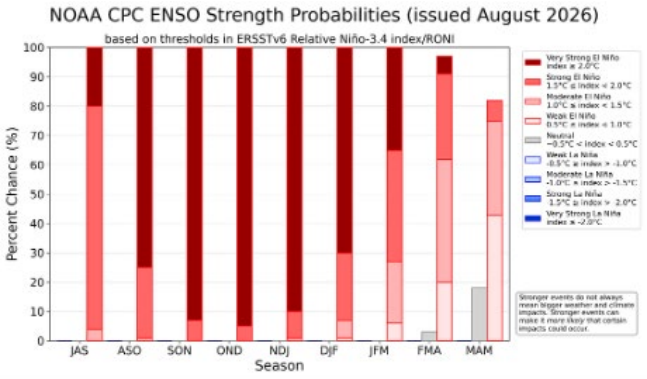


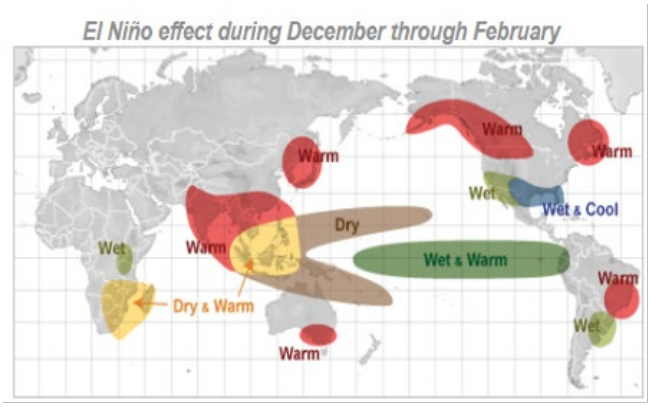


August 4th: There is no such thing as a "super El Niño," *Global News*

Claim: *Global News* claims that the developing 2026 "super El Niño" is strengthening "faster than we've ever recorded before," with meteorologist Anthony Farnell adding that "a lot of this can be blamed on climate change." The article tries connecting the developing El Niño and anthropogenic global warming to Canada's wildfires, heatwaves, drought, and potentially reduced winter snowpack, suggesting these conditions could worsen as El Niño intensifies through the remainder of 2026.

Fact-Check: There is no such thing as a "super El Niño." What's developing in the equatorial Pacific is a "very strong El Niño," an unusually strong warm phase of the El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO), an oceanic condition that has occurred with some regularity throughout history. During El Niño (La Niña) events, the equatorial Pacific Ocean is warmer (cooler) than average. The 2026 event is indeed intensifying, and NOAA says that there is a >90% chance that it becomes "very strong" by fall. However, *Global News'* claim that it's strengthening "faster than ever recorded before" is demonstrably false. During the onset of the 1997–98 very strong El Niño, NOAA documented an "extremely rapid transition," with sea surface temperatures in the monitoring region rising 1–1.5°C beyond the normal seasonal change in March 1997 and another 1°C in April. How ENSO responds, if at all, to global warming remains open for debate, and strong El Niño events do not guarantee extreme weather impacts increase everywhere.

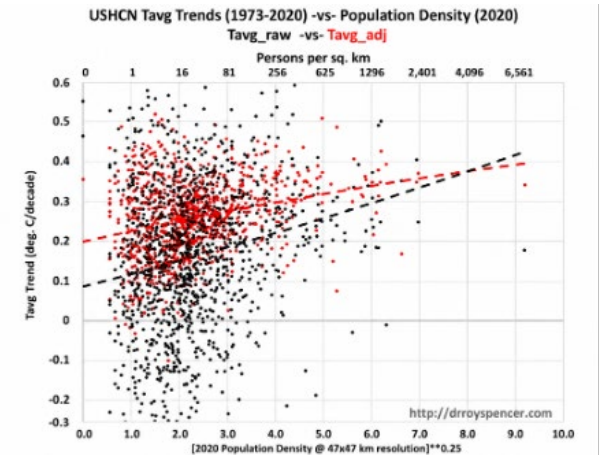




August 11th: No, *Associated Press*, NOAA's 0.12°F "record" does not prove July 2026 was America's hottest month ever

Claim: Seth Borenstein of the *Associated Press (AP)* reports that the contiguous United States "sizzled to its hottest month ever" in July 2026. NOAA's calculated average temperature for the Lower 48 was 76.9°F, "eclipsing the Dust Bowl's July 1936 by an eighth of a degree." Dr. Jeff Masters of Yale Climate Connections says breaking Dust Bowl records means "we're in deep trouble." Borenstein reports that the record was primarily driven by warm overnight low temperatures that beat the old mark by 0.7°F and writes that, "What's happening now is due to the burning of coal, oil and gas."

Fact-Check: This is misleading. NOAA's homogenized mean for July 2026 was marginally above July 1936 in their gridded data product, but the ranking is a 24-hour average driven by record high nighttime lows (64.2°F). The rise in nighttime low temperatures is a strong indicator of the urban heat island effect, as populations have grown, biasing the readings of urban temperature stations. Daytime highs ranked only sixth-warmest at 89.5°F; thus, a tenth-of-a-degree record is well within the range of uncertainty created by station moves, instrument changes, time of observation, urban heat island contamination, and NOAA's pairwise homogenization algorithm (PHA) that attempts to correct for the aforementioned issues. Dr. Roy Spencer, a principal research scientist at the University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH), has found evidence that NOAA's adjustments may cool pre-1990 readings too much (adjustments are applied broadly rather than on a station-by-station, day-by-day basis) and actually blend urban warming into rural stations. Dr. John Christy, former Alabama State Climatologist, also published a new paper finding modest declines in hottest-day values, daily high temperature records, and heatwave days in the U.S. Lower 48, with the strongest extremes occurring in the 1925–54 period, especially in the 1930s. NOAA's homogenized product is not incontrovertible proof that the benchmark heat of the 1930s has been eclipsed.



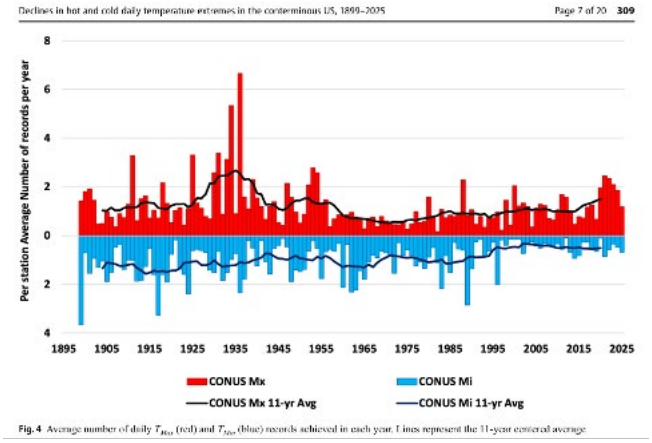
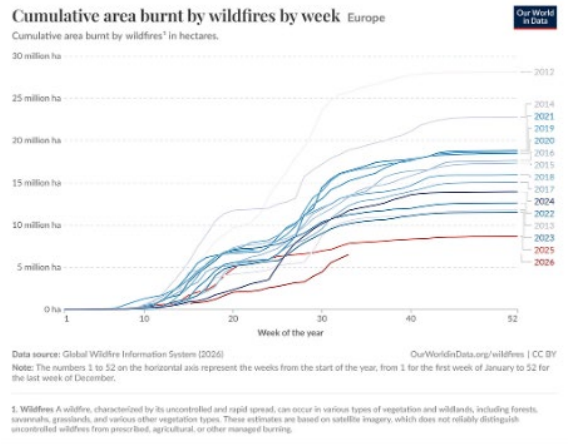


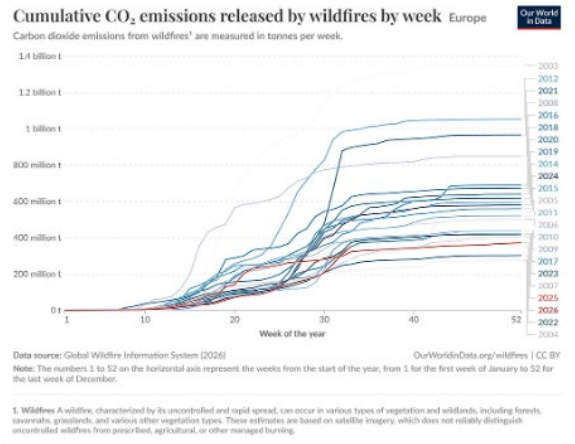
Fig. 4 Average number of daily T_{max} (red) and T_{min} (blue) records achieved in each year. Lines represent the 11-year centred average.

August 20th: Incorrect, *Scientific American*, Europe is not on fire.

Claim: Jackie Flynn Mogensen of *Scientific American* writes that "Europe is on fire" because the European Union has recorded more than 1,750 wildfires this year and that hundreds of thousands have been evacuated in France and Spain. A *Global Change Biology* paper is cited as showing the area of Europe affected by fire will "essentially triple" by 2100 under the IPCC's high-emissions scenario because climate change is "heating the continent up, drying the land and turning vegetation into tinder." Dr. Erica Smithwick of Penn State says that the findings match "increasingly severe fire conditions caused by climate change."

Fact-Check: *Scientific American* is lying. The year-to-date wildfire burn area in Europe is lowest on record according to the Global Wildfire Information System (GWIS), albeit year-to-date monitoring only goes back to 2012. When forests burn, more carbon dioxide (CO_2) is emitted. So, another metric we can look at are cumulative CO_2 emissions from fires, and for that metric, records go back 23 years. In Europe, 2026 year-to-date fire emissions are the seventh lowest on record. Countries like Spain and France have had a very bad fire year, but this is not uniformly exhibited across the European continent. Globally, there has been no increase in the amount of forested land burned since 2002.





August 25th: The Western U.S. water crisis has little to do with climate change, *Nature*

Claim: A new study published in *Nature Communications Earth & Environment* argues that man-made climate change has driven large drops in western U.S. snowpack and streamflow and a rise in irrigation demand, "with roughly half attributable to the Carbon Majors" (122 fossil-fuel and cement firms) whose emissions since 1950 are said to explain a 15% decline in April 1 snow water equivalent (SWE), a 6% drop in warm-season streamflow, and a 2.4% rise in irrigation demand over the period 2014–24, plus about one-third of Central Valley groundwater loss since 2003.

Fact-Check: The figures reported are not real measurements; they were derived from models. The authors used 12 arbitrarily selected CMIP6 models to compute how much these companies contributed to the reduction in western U.S. snowpack and streamflow, and an increase in irrigation demand. However, the models they chose had a mean climate sensitivity (global mean temperature response to doubling atmospheric CO_2) of 4.3°C, well above the IPCC's "best estimate" of 3°C and outside their "likely range" of 2.5–4°C. What's more, the research was funded by "green" NGOs, specifically the Grantham Foundation and Rockefeller Family Fund. In addition, there is no way to link any climate change or condition to a particular company. Emissions mix in the atmosphere and are circulated. Emissions and climate responses just can't be teased out like that. The discussion section of the study reads like a legal brief, as the results are intended to be used to prop litigation against said "Carbon Majors." These conflicts of interest call the reliability of these findings into question. Severe droughts are not unheard of in the desert southwest. During the Medieval Warm Period, a 400-year-long "megadrought" that eclipses the current western U.S. drought in terms of both duration and magnitude occurred naturally under pre-industrial levels of CO_2.

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Carbon emissions exacerbating the Western US water crisis

Check for updates

Emily. L. Williams[1], John T. Abatzoglou[2], Carly. A. Phillips[3], Mohammad Safeeq[1,4], Shaina Sadai[5], Oriana. S. Chegwidden[6], Angel. Santiago Fernandez-Bou[3], L. Delta Merner[5] & J. Pablo Ortiz-Partida[5]

In the western US, limited water supply and high demand—accentuated by anthropogenic climate change—have resulted in overallocated water resources and rapidly depleting groundwater. Simultaneously, legal and policy mechanisms are being pursued regarding the contributions of large emitting entities ("Carbon Majors") to such impacts. Here, we quantify impacts on western US water resources attributable to the Carbon Majors, and compare results with a simpler-to-use ('proportional') approach. Anthropogenic climate change has driven large decreases in water supply (snowpack and streamflow) and increases in water demand (irrigation demand), with roughly half attributable to the Carbon Majors. These changes have led to a widening seasonal gap between water supply and demand, and with Carbon Majors emissions accounting for ~1/3 of observed, climatically-driven groundwater loss in the Central Valley during 2003-2024. Though both approaches yield similar results, consistent over- and underestimations are present in each variable, suggesting caution is needed when using the proportional approach.

[1]Sierra Nevada Research Institute, University of California, Merced, Merced, CA, USA. [2]Management of Complex Systems Department, University of California, Merced, Merced, CA, USA. [3]Union of Concerned Scientists, Cambridge, MA, USA. [4]Civil and Environmental Engineering, University of California, Merced, CA, USA. [5]Five College Associate, Amherst, MA, USA. [6]CarbonPlan, San Francisco, CA, USA. e-mail: emilywilliams@ucmerced.edu

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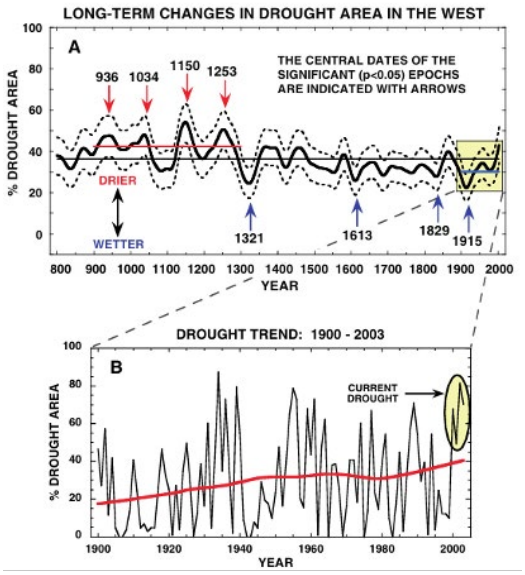
Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.



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