News
EarthBeat



A woman pushes a shopping cart full of coolers and cold beverages during a summer heatwave in New York City July 11, 2024. Seventeen U.S. states set annual heat records in 2024, the hottest year to date. (OSV News/Reuters/Caitlin Ochs)



by Brian Roewe

NCR environment correspondent

View Author Profile

broewe@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @brianroewe

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Each third Thursday of the month, a small group of devotees to the ecological vision of Passionist Fr. Thomas Berry congregates online for a night of reflection, conversation and community. The topic for their first gathering in 2025 was a weighty one: the state of the Earth.

"No matter where you go, whatever temperatures you check, they're all going the same direction — and they're increasing," said Br. Kevin Cawley, the Edmund Rice Christian Brothers' main representative at the United Nations and executive director of the Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue at Iona University, which hosted the Jan. 16 event.

The presentation by Cawley on the many plights facing the planet, as well as some signs of progress, came on the heels of the hottest year ever on record and amid turbulent global politics, with ramifications for international efforts around climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.

It also aligned with the Catholic Church's Jubilee Year, a time in which Pope Francis has invited the world's nearly 1.4 billion Catholics to become "pilgrims of hope." That word, hope, is all the more important during potentially dark times, Cawley said.

"It's grim, but it's not hopeless. It doesn't need to be our destiny," he said.

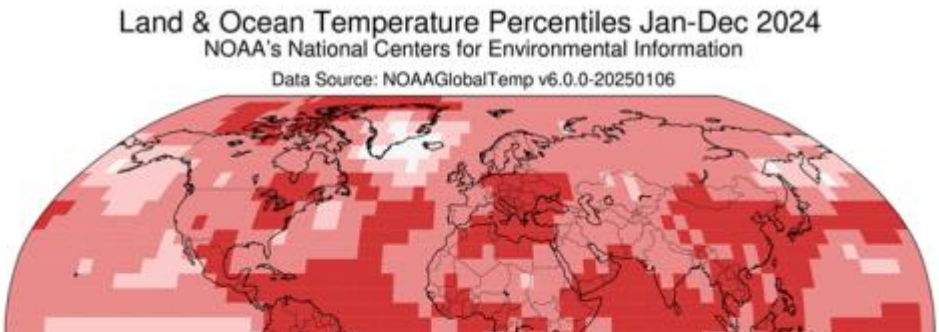


Br. Kevin Cawley, a member of the Congregation of Christian Brothers, is seen at the United Nations in 2018. Cawley is principal representative of Edmund Rice International at the U.N. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

A week before 2025's first Berry gathering, climate scientists in the U.S. and in Europe released their findings that 2024 was the planet's hottest year.

Average global temperatures soared 1.46 degrees Celsius (2.63 degrees Fahrenheit) above the preindustrial average from 1850 to 1900, according to NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The continents of North America, South America, Africa, Europe and Oceania recorded their hottest years on record. In Asia and the Arctic, temperatures settled for second.



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Scientists in the United Kingdom and the European Union, conducting slightly different analyses, concluded that 2024 was the first calendar year where global temperatures surpassed 1.5 C — the more ambitious temperature limit that nearly 200 nations have agreed to pursue under the Paris Agreement. Crossing that threshold in a single year does not mean the planet has fallen short of that goal, which would require the planet to exceed 1.5 C over multiple decades.

The record heat in 2024 was driven in part by a strong El Niño current in the first part of the year. Another factor was climate change, as greenhouse gas emissions released primarily by burning coal, oil and gas trap heat in the atmosphere. The past year continued the upward ascent of the planet's temperature, with the 10 hottest years on record all occurring in the past decade.

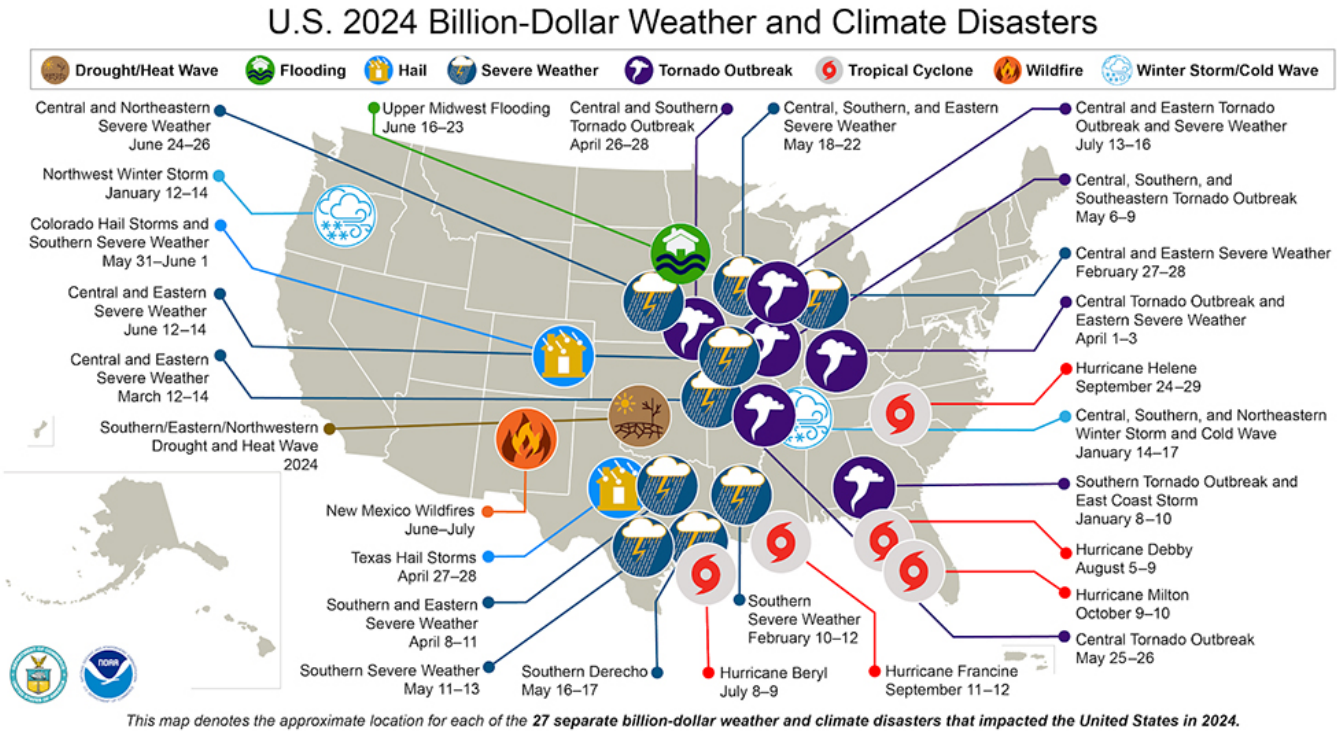
"It's very, very clear that the heat waves that we're seeing would not have been happening without the anthropogenic climate change," Gavin Schmidt, director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, said in a Jan. 10 press briefing. "The intense rainfall increases that we're seeing almost everywhere would not have been happening without the anthropogenic climate change. The signal in wildfires has been slow to emerge, but it is very clearly emerging, unfortunately. And so we are seeing changes."

Related: Soaring temps a sign the planet is sick — are we listening? Pope Francis asks

The United States experienced its warmest year in NOAA's 130 years of recordkeeping, heating 3.5 F above the 20th-century average. Seventeen states set annual heat records across the Northeast, South and Midwest.

The country also suffered 27 weather disasters — 17 of which were severe storms — that had costs exceeding $1 billion in 2024. Together, they brought $182.7 billion in damages. Among them, the back-to-back hurricanes Helene and Milton devastated the South.

The new year opened with its own billion-dollar disaster, as massive wildfires have burned across Southern California.



A map of the U.S. plotted with 27 weather and climate disasters each costing $1 billion or more that occurred between January and December 2024. (NOAA/NCEI)

Scientists hesitate to connect climate change to any single extreme weather event. But the increasing heat on the planet, they say, has created conditions that magnify and intensify disasters. Hotter ocean waters, for instance, provide fuel for far stronger hurricanes and storms, and increasing heat waves lead to droughts and dry conditions that can allow wildfires to spread more widely and rapidly.

In spite of the many plights, environmental and otherwise, facing the world, the pope has called humanity to hope.

"[Hope] is not a habit or a character trait — that you either have or you don't — but a strength to be asked for," Francis told thousands of pilgrims at the Vatican Jan. 14. "That is why we make ourselves pilgrims: We come to ask for a gift, to start again on life's journey."

He continued: "Hope for our common home — this Earth of ours, so abused and wounded — and the hope for all human beings resides in the difference of God. His greatness is different."

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In his presentation, Cawley surveyed 2024's record heat along with piecemeal developments at U.N. summits on climate, biodiversity and plastic pollution. He noted Donald Trump's election and his pledges to ramp up oil and gas development and exit the Paris Agreement, and upheaval in European governments that could also disrupt environmental advances.

The Edmund Rice brother also pointed to deforestation in the Amazon decreasing by 30% — its lowest level in nine years — and efforts, including by Francis, to absolve debts burdening developing countries.

Once informed of the state of the world, Cawley asked and answered a question likely floating in his audience's mind: "What can one person do? And that is not be one person."

Related: Climate clashes with Trump could await as Cardinal McElroy heads to DC

The ensuing conversation offered ways to do that: join Catholic ecological groups like Laudato Si' Movement and Catholic Climate Covenant; participate in boycotts; start community organizations to eliminate plastic use; and raise awareness about what's happening to the Earth.

Even a small group meeting monthly in the spirit of Thomas Berry can be a starting point, said Notre Dame Sr. Kathleen Deignan, founder of the Berry Forum and Iona's Diegnan Institute for Earth and Spirit.

Deignan said that Berry, who died in 2009 at age 94, would likely be anguished to witness the planet's present moment but would have responded with the ferocity of a prophet.

"I think he would have been pushing us to action, to really serious, personal and communal commitments. That's what I think," she said. "And I think he would have been our Jeremiah."