Google plans to share heat alerts in search

Google plans to roll out new alerts in search for extreme heat events, the company announced in a blog post today. Eventually, users should be able to find important information about extreme temperatures in their area when they search relevant terms like “heatwave.”

The alert will bring up information like when a heatwave is forecast to start and end in an area, local news on the event, and recommended actions to stay safe. The feature is expected to be available in the US and “a number of countries” including parts of Europe in the second half of the year, according to Hema Budaraju, senior director of product for health and social impact at Google search.

“We feel a great sense of responsibility as we continue to scale this work building on this type of alert,” Budaraju said in a press briefing yesterday. “Climate change is the defining challenge of our generation, which brings new and extreme weather events that many of us are learning how to adapt to.”

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The plan builds on the company’s previous attempts to help people stay informed about wildfires and floods in their area. Google has a wildfire tracking tool in Maps that’s available in several countries, and has another tool called FloodHub that shares flood information in 20 countries.

Extreme heat is another disaster that climate change is making

worse. Search interest in heatwaves hit a record high globally in July 2022, according to Google. That month, the UK suffered a record-smashing heatwave, with temperatures soaring above 40 degrees Celsius (over 104 degrees Fahrenheit) in some regions for the first time in recorded history. It would have been "virtually impossible" for the typically cooler UK to reach temperatures that high without climate change, scientists found.

Authorities advised people to avoid traveling, stay out of the sun and avoid physical exertion during the hottest parts of the day during the July heat spell. By the end of the sweltering summer, England and Wales had recorded more than 3,200 excess deaths. Hundreds of thousands of people die each year from heat-related causes around the globe. But heat-related deaths and illness can be prevented if people can find safe ways to stay cool.

That's where warning systems can play a crucial role, and some advocates have pushed for governments to treat heatwaves like severe storms that people need to prepare for in advance. The US, where heat is already the top weather-related killer, launched a federal website last year to accomplish something similar to Google's plan. Heat.gov maps which parts of the country are under heat alerts and shares tips to stay safe.

Google's announcement today also includes updates on other work it's doing to equip local governments and nonprofit organizations with tools to cope with extreme weather. In 2020, Google launched Tree Canopy Lab in Los Angeles, which helps city planners quickly see what parts of the city are lacking tree cover. Urban areas without much greenery often become "heat islands," pockets of the city that are hotter than surrounding areas. Strategically planting trees in these vulnerable neighborhoods is one way to cool them down. Tree Canopy has now expanded from 14 cities to 350 cities globally, Google said in its blog post today.

Google also announced that the nonprofit World Resources Institute (WRI) is the first recipient of its $30 million Google.org Impact Challenge. WRI will receive $5 million for a project that “will use sensors, satellite imagery and AI to close data gaps, model air temperature, humidity, surface reflectivity, tree cover and heat vulnerability,” according to Google’s blog post.

https://www.theverge.com/2023/3/29/23660577/google-search-heat-alerts