Switzerland's glaciers are losing an astonishing amount of ice

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Dry winters and a warming climate are taking a toll on centuries-old ice in the Alps, researchers say, with about 20 percent of Swiss glacial ice melting since 2021

Switzerland's iconic glaciers lost an enormous amount of ice in 2026, a new report shows, signaling an ongoing rapid meltdown driven by climate change that has astonished even scientists studying it.

About 20 percent of glacial ice in Switzerland has vanished since 2021, according to the Glacier Monitoring in Switzerland, or GLAMOS, a university-operated service that conducts the measurements. For some glaciers this year, the losses were unprecedented, and they eclipsed 2022, the worst meltdown year on record.

"A year like this is just completely unsustainable for glaciers," said Matthias Huss, a glaciologist at the university ETH Zurich, who has tracked the losses for more than two decades. "In some places, it really felt unreal."

Scientists found that some glacial tongues had lost as much as 10 meters of ice — or about 33 feet — in 2026. A handful of small glaciers disappeared completely.

The Alps's glaciers have been shrinking for decades, but never at such a rapid pace. Melt rates are now more than double than that of any other five-year period on record. Huss, who also leads GLAMOS, said it feels like they are evaporating before his eyes. "We are really on a different level," Huss said. "With this climate, we cannot keep glaciers in the Alps."

Much warmer temperatures are creeping up into the Alps as the impacts of human-caused global warming accelerate. At the same time, a string of very dry winters in Switzerland provided little reprieve over recent years.

Another dry winter in 2025 left the glaciers with a snow deficit of 25 percent and little defense against the record-breaking summer heat waves that followed, as the Northern Hemisphere recorded the hottest summer on record. Temperatures pushed above freezing at new heights across Switzerland past 4,000 meters elevation, or about 13,100 feet.

That meant glaciers could melt from their highest points, a dynamic that Huss calls "a death sentence."

The glaciers are also increasingly decaying from below, scientists have found. Warm water and air beneath the glaciers carves cavities under the ice that eat away at the glacier, accelerating their retreat.

Between the 2025 and 2026 seasons alone, glacial ice volume shrunk 5.5 percent (the year is calculated between autumns to follow the hydrologic cycle). Glacial thickness, on average,

retreated between 8 and 13 feet. Much of the ice that's melting has been there for centuries. The findings are based on measurements across about two dozen glaciers, where scientists drill poles into the ice every year. Some locations have been continuously monitored for more than a century.

Bottom of the Rhône Glacier ending at a small lake created by melting ice (Sean Gallup, Getty Images)

The long-term impact could be dramatic for Switzerland, where more than half of its electricity is generated by hydropower. Switzerland's power industry has long relied on glacial melt during the summers to fill any gaps in water supply during hot and dry years.