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Scientific experts have warned that deadly pandemics are likely to keep happening if action is not taken to protect natural environments.

Future pandemics will happen more often, spread faster and kill more people than COVID-19, the experts said. Such events are also expected to cause lasting harm to the world economy.

A worker pours water on newly planted flowers at a burial site for victims of the COVID-19 coronavirus at Keputih cemetery in Surabaya, East Java on July 15, 2020. (Photo by JUNI KRISWANTO / AFP)

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The warning came in a report from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, an international expert group that advises governments. The group has more than 130 member states.

The experts called for major efforts aimed at preventing pandemics rather than trying to contain them after they happen. The report urges major worldwide efforts to stop habitat destruction that can lead viruses to jump from wild animals to humans.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has estimated that three out of every four new or emerging infectious diseases in people come from animals. Scientists have said COVID-19 probably started in bats and began spreading among humans.

In their report, the experts predict that about half of an estimated 1.7 million undiscovered viruses in nature might be able to infect people. Activities such as poaching or clearing forests to grow soy or palm oil can bring humans and disease closer together.

Deforestation, agriculture expansion, urbanization and other land-use changes are responsible for about one-third of all new diseases that have emerged since 1960, the report says. The \$100 billion global wildlife trade is also responsible for the spread of new and existing diseases.

The experts predict that about \$50 billion a year in pandemic prevention spending could save the world about \$1 trillion a year, on average, in economic damage. They said that as of July, the economic cost from COVID-19 was at least \$8 trillion and rising.

Peter Daszak was the report's lead writer. He is president of EcoHealth Alliance, an international health, environment and development organization. He said in a statement that even though the experts call for urgent action, "this is not a doom and gloom report saying the world's going to end and it's too late." Instead, Daszak said it should be seen as "an

optimistic call for action."

He noted that the current method for dealing with pandemics is to wait for them to emerge and then try to identify them before they spread. COVID-19 has demonstrated the problems with that plan. Officials attempted to contain COVID-19 after the disease was discovered last year, but it was already too late.