National Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook

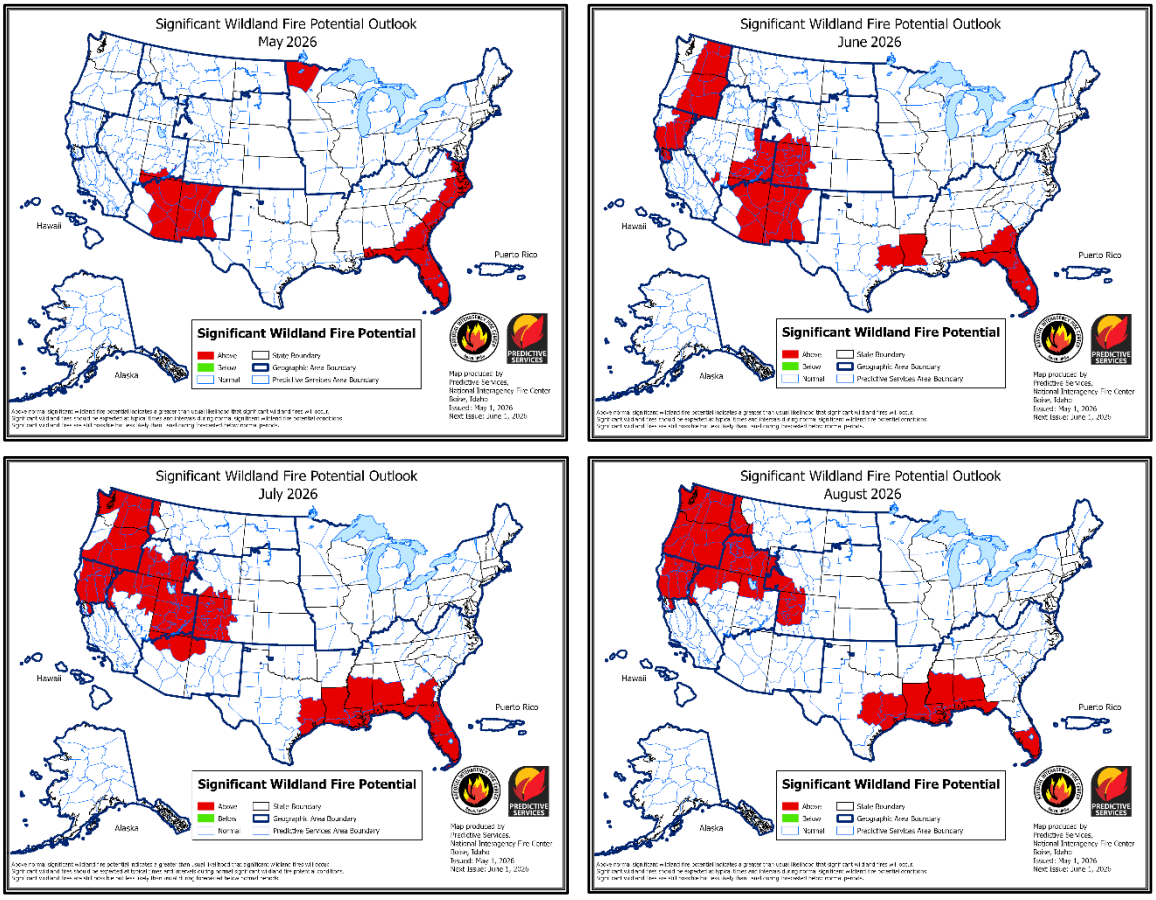
Predictive Services
National Interagency Fire Center

Issued: May 1, 2026
Next Issuance: June 1, 2026

Outlook Period – May through August 2026

Executive Summary

The significant wildland fire potential forecasts included in this outlook represent the cumulative forecasts of the ten Geographic Area Predictive Services units and the National Predictive Services unit.



Fire activity was steady across the U.S. in April, with a moderate uptick in activity the latter half of the month. The Southern Area observed the most notable increase in activity the last two weeks of the month, with more modest increases in the Southwest and Eastern Areas. Low but consistent levels of activity were observed in the Rocky Mountain Area and California. Given the low but persistent level of activity, the National Preparedness Level remained at two (on a scale of 1-5) through April. As of April 30, 1,848,210 acres have burned across the country, which is 194% of the previous 10-year average. So far this year 24,066 wildfires have been reported, also well above average, at 150%.

April precipitation anomalies were mixed across the U.S., with well below normal precipitation observed across the coastal Southeast and Piedmont and below normal precipitation extending into the Lower Mississippi, Ohio, and Tennessee valleys, Mid-Atlantic, and coastal New England. Below normal precipitation was also found across most of the High Plains, Southwest, and the

coastal Northwest. Above normal precipitation occurred from Texas north and east to the Great Lakes, with above normal precipitation also occurring in scattered areas of Florida and larger areas of northern California and the northern and central Rockies. Overall drought increased across the country with nearly 62% of the U.S. now in drought. Drought persisted, intensified, or developed in much of the western U.S., High Plains, and Southeast, with the greatest degradation in portions of the Southeast. Drought improvement was limited to much of central Texas, eastern Oklahoma, much of the Great Lakes, and portions of northern New England.

Climate Prediction Center and Predictive Services outlooks issued in late April forecast temperatures that are likely to be above normal across the West in May, focused on the Northwest. Below normal temperatures are favored in the Great Lakes into the Appalachians. Below normal precipitation is expected in May for the Northwest to the Midwest, while above normal precipitation is likely from the southern High Plains to the Lower Mississippi Valley. Transitioning to summer, above normal temperatures are likely across most of the U.S., especially in the West, with no clear signal in the Midwest, although it may trend cooler in August there. Precipitation is likely to be below normal in the Northwest and northern Rockies, and for much of the southern Plains into portions of the Lower Mississippi Valley, especially over the peak summer months of July and August. Precipitation is likely to be above normal near the East Coast, with an above normal monsoon season possible in the Southwest.

From the current conditions and forecast, above normal significant fire potential is forecast to continue through May for the coastal Southeast, far southern Alabama, and Florida. Above normal potential is also forecast for much of the Southwest into far southwest Utah, as well as northwest Minnesota. In June, above normal significant fire potential in the Southeast will retreat to South Georgia and Florida, with normal potential returning to northwest Minnesota. However, above normal potential is forecast to expand from the Southwest to much of the Greater Four Corners and portions of southern Nevada. Above normal potential is also forecast to develop in portions of east Texas, most of Louisiana, northern California, and the Inland Northwest. In July, significant fire potential in the West will return to normal for most areas of the Southwest, but above normal will expand from Utah and western Colorado to all the northern Great Basin and most of northern California and Northwest. Above normal potential will persist in July in South Georgia, Florida, East Texas, and Louisiana as it broadens to add much of the Gulf Coast and Lower Mississippi Valley. For August, potential will return to normal in South Georgia and northern Florida but persist in South Florida and much of the northern Gulf Coast. Above normal potential will spread across all Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and western Wyoming in August, while persisting across most of northern California, northern Nevada, northern Utah, and northwest Colorado.

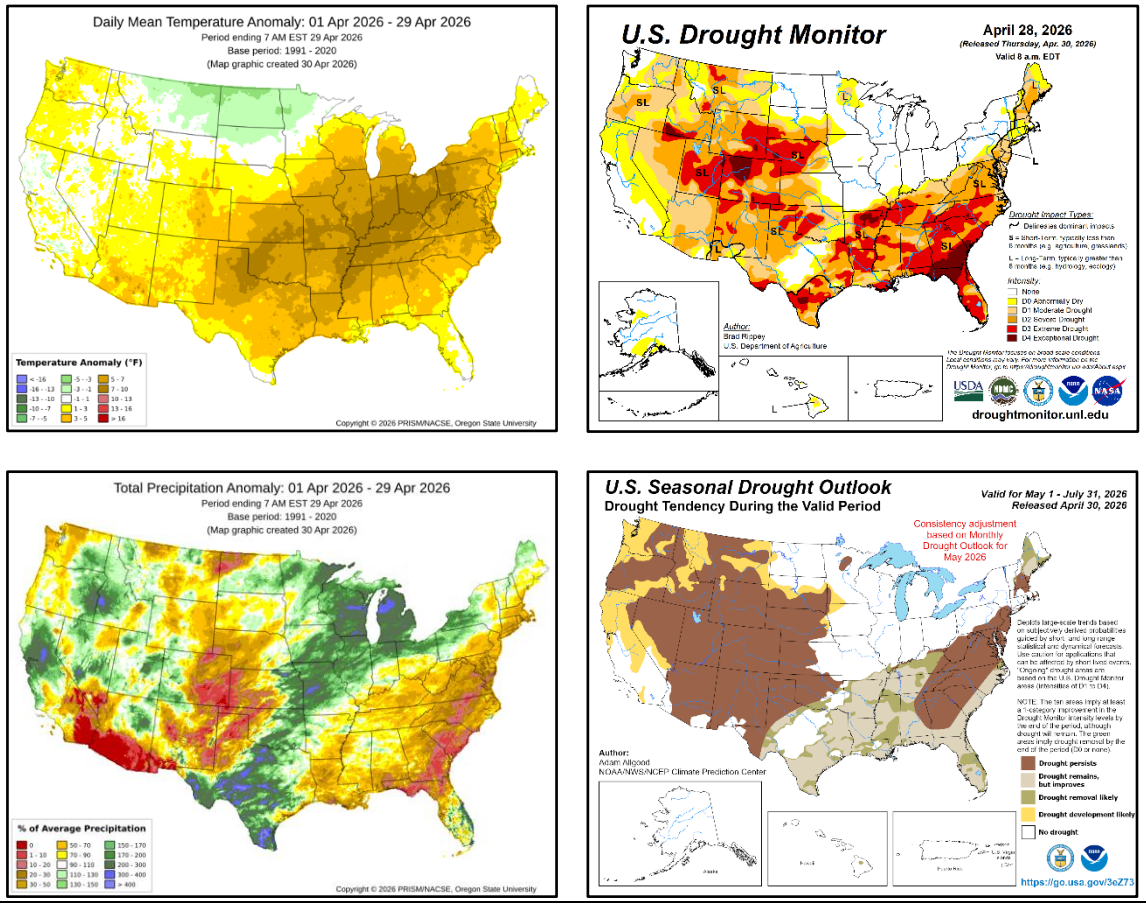
Past Weather and Drought

Temperatures in April were above normal for much of the country, with temperatures averaging 5-10°F above normal across much of the southern Plains into the Lower Great Lakes, Ohio and Tennessee valleys, and Appalachians. Temperatures were slightly below normal for eastern Montana into northwest Minnesota, and much of Alaska. Temperatures in Hawai'i averaged near to below normal for most of the state in April but were above normal for eastern portions of the Big Island.

Precipitation was more varied across the U.S. in April, with below-normal precipitation found from the Lower Mississippi and Ohio valleys to the East Coast, mainly from southern New England to North Florida. Precipitation was well below normal for the Florida Panhandle northeast into the Piedmont where less than 20% of normal precipitation fell in April. Precipitation was largely above normal to the north and west, from much of Texas into the Mid-Mississippi Valley, Great Lakes, and northern New England. Precipitation was below normal for western Washington and Oregon, as well as much of the High Plains, New Mexico, and Mojave and Sonoran deserts. However, precipitation was above normal for northern California into much of Nevada, eastern Oregon, southwest Idaho, and portions of the Four Corners. Hawai'i precipitation was well above normal,

but Alaska precipitation was mixed with above-normal precipitation for the central and eastern Interior but below normal for the panhandle and North Slope.

Snowpack across the West is well below normal, indicative of a snow drought, with many river basins from Oregon and California to the Great Basin, Colorado, and Southwest less than 20% of normal, if not already barren of snow at all observing locations in a basin. While snowpack in the Washington Cascades to Idaho and western Montana is 40-80% of normal, much of the snow resides at the higher elevations above 6,000 to 8,000 feet.



Left: Departure from Normal Temperature (top) and Percent of Normal Precipitation (bottom) ***(from PRISM Climate Group, Oregon State University).*** **Right: U.S. Drought Monitor (top) and Seasonal Drought Outlook (bottom)** ***(from National Drought Mitigation Center and the Climate Prediction Center)***.

The persistently dry conditions in the Southeast resulted in an increase in activity there especially the latter half of April in Georgia and Florida. Several large fires emerged April 15-20, with the Highway 82 and Pineland Road fires in South Georgia producing extreme fire behavior resulting in the loss of dozens of homes. Other areas saw more moderate levels of activity, although much of New Mexico and Nebraska saw more fire activity than normal in April.

Overall drought increased across the U.S. during April with nearly 62% of the country in drought as of April 28. Drought developed and/or intensified in much of the West, and from the Lower Mississippi Valley to Southeast and Mid-Atlantic. Significant drought intensification occurred in the Southeast and High Plains of Colorado. However, drought improved in much of Texas and eastern Oklahoma, with drought removal occurring in the Lower Great Lakes and northern Missouri. Areas of extreme drought continued to expand across the U.S. and is now found across more than 19% of the country. The most extensive extreme drought is in the Lower Mississippi Valley, Southeast, and from much of Utah into the central Rockies and Nebraska. Exceptional drought has also expanded with the largest areas in northwest Colorado, South Texas, northern Arkansas, South Georgia, North Florida, and southwest Idaho. Drought is expected to persist and

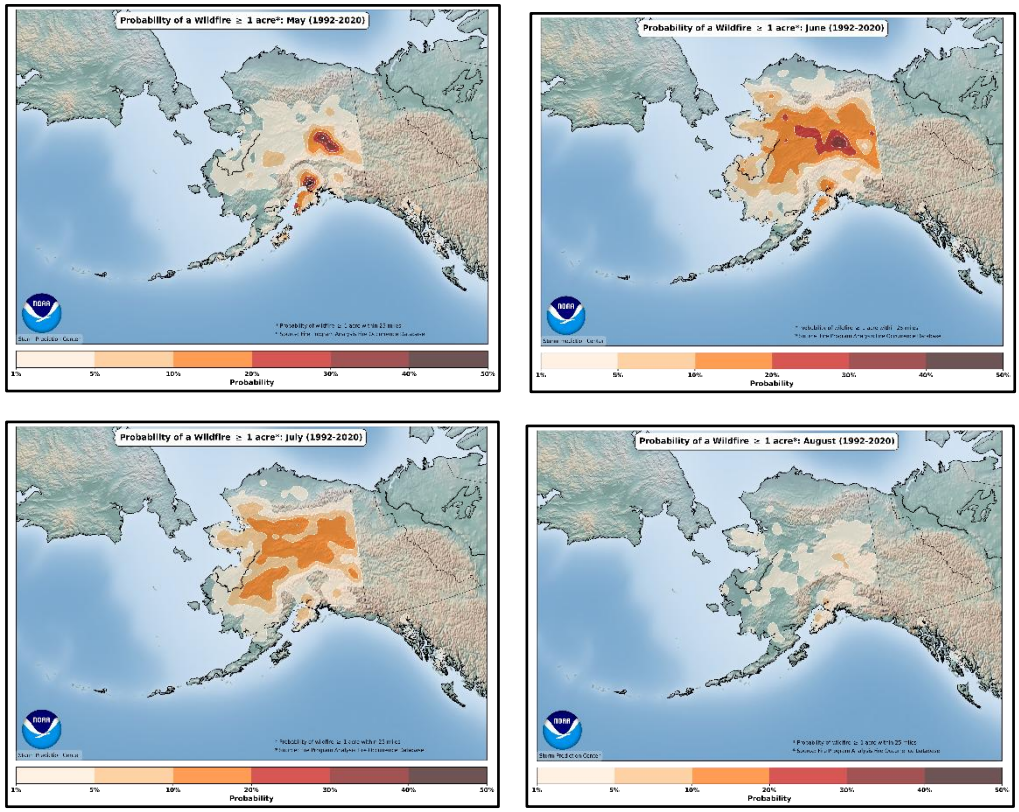
expand across most of the West through July. Drought is expected to persist in the Mid-Atlantic and southern Appalachians, while improvement is expected from much of Texas into the Southeast, weighted toward the climatologically wetter months of June and July.

Weather and Climate Outlooks

The El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) has moved into a neutral state as sea surface temperatures (SSTs) have warmed to near average in the central equatorial Pacific Ocean. However, SSTs off the west coast of South America have warmed to above normal, and temperatures below the surface, about 100 meters down, are extremely warm and exceeding 5 C above normal east of the International Date Line. The Climate Prediction Center (CPC) forecasts the ENSO-neutral period to be brief, with a 62% chance of El Niño conditions developing later this month into June and July. The chance of El Niño developing by late summer is near 90%, with El Niño forecast to continue into the fall and winter. The CPC is forecasting a 15% chance of a strong El Niño by August, and a 25% chance of a very strong El Niño by late fall and winter.

The Pacific Decadal Oscillation (PDO) remains in a negative phase and is likely to remain negative through the outlook period. The Madden-Julian Oscillation (MJO) was active in the western Pacific and western hemisphere the past two weeks but has weakened recently. The MJO is forecast to remain relatively week for most of May and has little impact on this forecast, with a small contribution from the PDO. The main climate driver for the outlook will be the rapid transition to El Niño over the summer.

Geographic Area Forecasts



Normal fire season progression across Alaska shown by the probability of a fire greater than 1 acre within 25 miles. Fire severity cannot be inferred from this analysis. (Based on 1992-2020 FPA Data. Analysis courtesy of the Storm Prediction Center.)

Alaska

Normal fire potential is expected for Alaska during the next four months. The landscape that remains snow covered will become snow free at normal times throughout May, with small, human-caused fire activity increasing through this period and peaking in late June.

This winter saw very deep snowpack for parts of the Interior, and near to slightly below normal amounts elsewhere. However, a cool April has pushed snow-free dates slightly later than normal across much of the Interior. Parts of southwest and south-central Alaska continue to see below to well below normal snowpack due to dry and cold conditions for much of the late winter.

The U.S. Drought Monitor continues to show some areas of abnormally dry conditions across the central-western Interior and parts of southwest to south-central Alaska, including the Anchorage Bowl and Kenai Peninsula. This has been an accumulating concern throughout the last six months.

Climate Prediction Center outlooks for May indicate above-normal temperatures are likely for the eastern half of the state and the North Slope. Near-normal temperatures are favored for the western half of the state, with below-normal temperatures favored for coastal areas of southwest Alaska. For June and beyond, warmer and wetter than normal conditions are favored for most of the state, though near-normal precipitation is more likely for the panhandle and the northeast part of the mainland. Overall, this indicates that the snowpack will begin to melt rapidly, leading to a predominantly normal start to fire season in most areas. With both above0normal temperatures and precipitation forecasted for most of the state, fire activity looks to be near normal throughout the peak summer season.

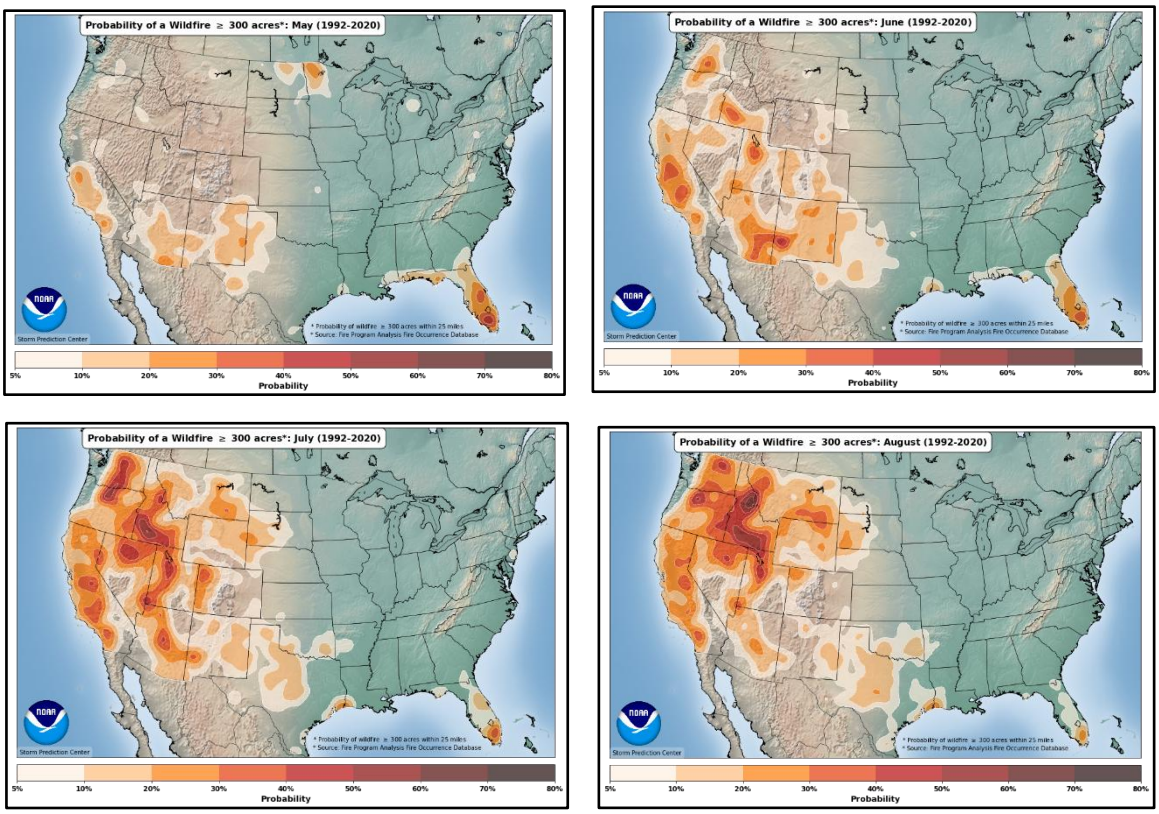
El Niño-Southern Oscillation conditions are forecast to shift from the weak La Niña this past winter to a progressively stronger El Niño throughout the late spring and summer months. The likelihood of a large fire season increases during a strong El Niño, though most seasons remain small. El Niño is not likely to become strong until late in the Alaska fire season or after fire season ends.

Springtime temperatures and precipitation have an impact on snowmelt timing which determines when fire season begins. However, the intensity of summer fire season is more dependent on late spring and summer temperatures and precipitation. The date of snow-free conditions does not have a significant impact on the number of acres burned over the course of the summer.

During April there have been nine small fires along the population corridor. These fires were wind-driven and showed small amounts of growth. This is a reminder that as snow melts, especially along roadways, small wind-driven fires will become more common.

Fuels across the state remain mostly snow covered except for isolated areas of south-central Alaska and low elevation areas of the panhandle. Fire weather indices have been turned on for those areas, but conditions remain unconcerning. Fire weather indices will be turned on as remaining areas become snow-free, which will occur throughout the month of May. This typically occurs first in low elevations of the southern portion of the state before progressing upwards in elevation and farther northward.

As more areas become snow-free throughout May, an increase in small human-caused fires is expected, especially along the road system. Moving into late May and early June, lightning activity will increase and may cause ignitions depending on local fuels conditions. Deeper duff fuels become available in mid to late June and will continue to burn until late summer rain arrives toward the end of July. Significant fire growth into August will only be possible if late summer rains do not arrive toward the end of July, as is normal. Thus, normal fire potential is forecast for Alaska for this season.



Normal fire season progression across the contiguous U.S. shown by the probability of a fire greater than 300 acres within 25 miles. Fire severity cannot be inferred from this analysis. (Based on 1992-2020 FPA Data. Analysis courtesy of the Storm Prediction Center.)

Northwest

Significant fire potential in the Northwest Geographic Area is expected to remain normal across all Predictive Services Areas (PSAs) during May with short, localized windows. Green-up is progressing area-wide, though the east side will see a shorter-than-typical green-up window due to April warmth, weak mid-elevation snow, and continued warm, dry conditions. Confidence is slightly above average that June will bring the first broad step-up in significant fire potential east of the Cascades, followed by increasing west side potential in July and August, consistent with past analogs.

April featured a generally warm and dry pattern across the Northwest Geographic Area with a mix of weak frontal systems and transient ridging. Most storms delivered little precipitation but briefly slowed drying in fine dead fuels. A late-month system produced wrap-around moisture on April 22, bringing around one-half inch of rain to parts of the lower Columbia Basin. This system also delivered light to moderate high-elevation snow in the far northeast Oregon mountains, briefly improving snow coverage at the highest elevations. Outside these localized events, April precipitation remained limited, and mid-elevation snowpack continued to melt out earlier than usual.

Temperature and precipitation anomalies reflected these conditions. Above normal temperatures were widespread across Oregon and Washington in April, with the strongest warm anomalies focused over interior areas. Precipitation patterns were mixed but leaned dry in most locations. Much of central Oregon, southeast Washington, and portions of the Columbia Basin finished well below normal, while only isolated higher basins recorded near-normal totals. High snow levels kept new accumulation above 5,000 to 5,500 feet, leaving mid-elevation snow water equivalent (SWE) deficits and exposing fuels early.

Drought conditions changed little through April. Abnormally dry to moderate drought persisted across large areas of eastern Oregon and central to southeastern Washington, with pockets of severe drought in southern Oregon. Warm temperatures, limited April precipitation, and weak mid-elevation snow support the likelihood of expanding dryness heading into late spring unless more robust precipitation develops.

April fire activity remained low across the Northwest. New ignitions were small and primarily human-caused, which is typical during the pre-green-up period. One incident in southeast Oregon exceeded 250 acres within a single burn period before suppression efforts were completed.

Energy Release Component (ERC) values increased through early April before returning to near-normal values by mid-month, then rose again toward the end of the month. Seasonal drying continued, and the lack of snowpack is exposing fuels at higher elevations earlier than usual. Green-up is now widespread across the Northwest, moderating fire potential despite the recent upward trend in ERCs.

The El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO) remains neutral entering the outlook period, though warming across the central and eastern Pacific continues at the surface, with very warm anomalies below the surface. The Climate Prediction Center (CPC) has terminated its La Niña Advisory and issued an El Niño Watch, indicating increasing confidence in an El Niño onset during the next three months. Although summer ENSO effects are weak for the Northwest Geographic Area, the broader pattern supports continued warm, dry conditions through early August. Analog guidance now leans toward a middle-ground 2018 evolution, with diminishing support for the near-normal summer of 2005, while the extreme 2015 trajectory remains possible given early fuel exposure, ongoing warmth, and declining soil moisture.

The CPC's temperature outlooks favor above normal temperatures from May through August across Oregon and Washington. The warm start to spring and limited mid-elevation snow will allow drying to advance into early summer, especially east of the Cascades. Seasonal guidance maintains this warm tilt through July and August, supporting an expectation of increasing fuel availability across all PSAs.

The CPC's precipitation outlooks show no reliable wet signal for the Northwest Geographic Area through the May-August period. Portions of the region hold a slight tilt toward below-normal precipitation early in the season, while much of the area trends toward equal chances later in summer, indicating no favored outcome. Drying is expected to continue across both interior and west side PSAs, absent a prolonged rain period.

Significant fire potential is expected to remain normal across all PSAs during May as seasonal green-up progresses, though a one-to-two-week hot and dry spell could accelerate the onset of wildfire season in some central and eastern PSAs. These PSAs are also expected to have a shorter-than-typical green-up due to warm conditions and limited SWE. By June, the continued lack of a prolonged wet period will shift significant fire potential above normal in PSAs NW05–NW12 east of the Cascade Crest as live fuels cure and long-term drought maintains dry dead fuels. July brings the largest increase in significant fire activity, consistent with the 2018 and 2015 analogs, with NW01 and NW04 also above normal. By August, all PSAs reach above normal potential as west side live fuels finish curing.

Northern California and Hawai'i

Significant fire potential in northern California is projected to be normal during May. Above normal potential is projected during June for large portions of the area while expanding even further for July and August except for the coastal areas. Historically, northern California averages a total of two large fires during May. During June a total of 11 large fires is typically observed, while 15 to

17 on average occur area-wide during July and August. Hawaii's significant fire potential is expected to remain normal for May through August.

April was the opposite in terms of precipitation compared to March and illustrates the wild pendulum swings the region has experienced the past several months. Several slow-moving storm systems provided widespread wetting precipitation to northern California. There was a weak atmospheric river event from April 19 to 22. Precipitation anomalies were generally above normal although some smaller pockets of below normal occurred across the North Coast Predictive Services Area (PSA) and northeast corner. Average temperatures were generally near to above normal. Due to the active nature of the pattern, observed lightning was robust. Nearly 10,300 lightning strikes were observed using the Vaisala detection system. The 2000-2025 Vaisala average is a little over 1,500, and the previous April monthly record was a little over 8,600 recorded in 2016. There were three weak to moderate dry northerly and easterly wind periods with the strongest observed April 16 and 17. There were three gusty westerly or southerly wind events, with one that did not coincide with particularly dry conditions, and low relative humidity accompanying the wind events on April 20 and to a lesser extent on April 25.

Flammability of the dead fuel bed was mixed during April with unusually dry and moist periods. The driest dead fuels occurred from April 5 to 8 when the regional Energy Release Component (ERC) value neared the 60th percentile. Near to below normal regional ERC values were observed from April 10 through the end of the month. Herbaceous green-up was in various states across most elevations although noticeable annual species curing was observed across the interior lowlands as well as the far east. Herbaceous fuels for the most part remained a heat sink and inhibited fire spread in most areas. Multiple frost and freeze periods occurred across portions of the area, therefore moderating the green-up advancement observed during March. Regardless, early green-up and fuel moistening persisted across the low and mid elevations during April and resulted in less flammable fuels. The one exception would be found in the pine species where the "spring moisture dip" likely was ongoing and occurred earlier than normal.

Some of the storm systems brought brief periods of mid elevation snow cover but the snowpack overall remained well below normal. The amount of moisture found within the snowpack compared to normal increased slightly from 5-20% normal on March 31 to 10-25% normal on April 29, with a slight decrease overall in snow water equivalent. April 1 is historically when the maximum occurs, and this year was the second lowest since 1980. The lowest was in 2015 at 5% normal. After a multi-month hiatus, moderate drought returned to northern California, impacting northern and eastern portions of the region. Moderate drought was previously observed during late October 2025 across the far northwest corner. The two-month Evaporative Demand Drought Index (EDDI) value on April 26 showed dryness markers across large portions of the Coast Range and northern and eastern areas although noticeably less compared to March 26.

Wildfire business lessened during April compared to March due to the multi-day moisture intrusions. The daily wildfire ignition average through April 28 was 4.6 and lower compared to the March average of 5.1. The April 2008-2025 daily ignition average is 4.3. Wildfires grew no larger than a couple of acres. The regional significant fire average for April based on a 1992-2025 database is less than one. The regional preparedness level remained at one. Prescribed burning fluctuated between pile and underburn projects with some restrictions to burning due to weather and fuel conditions.

Based on both analogs and dynamic climate models there is a higher likelihood for warmer than normal temperatures during the next four months. There is less certainty from month to month for the precipitation. Convection is likely to play a bigger role during the next several months due to cut-off low tendencies, a robust North American Monsoon and a higher likelihood for an active east Pacific tropical cyclone season. As of right now, the number of dry wind events, both onshore and offshore, should be in the normal range during the next few months. Heat waves are also likely to influence significant fire growth events, either during or just after the heat waves.

Based on the current fuel state and future weather predictions, normal significant fire potential is projected for May in northern California. A few barriers to fire spread will be in play during May including green-up and residual snow melt, although increased flammability will be found in the lowland grass fuels as the month progresses. Historically May is typically a light significant fire month, with an average of two. For June, above normal potential is forecast across most of the region excluding the northwest corner and High Sierra where live fuels should be more resistant to fire spread but dead fuels should be unusually flammable. Elsewhere, curing should be most evident across the low and mid elevations and combine with extended heat and dry wind events. Significant fire occurrence historically increases more noticeably during June with an average of 11 large fires observed. Critically flammable live and dead fuel alignments are likely to expand during July and August, with large fire activity driven by a mix of heat, wind, and lightning. Drought is likely to increase in coverage especially from June through August. During July there is an average of 15 significant fires that increases to 17 during August. There are also several impactful wildcards to the forecast the next few months such as added surface and ladder fuel loading due to tree damage that occurred during a mid-February snowstorm, potential freeze-killed fuels, and herbaceous loading that includes a second germination across some low elevation areas west of the Cascade-Sierra Crest.

Sea surface temperature (SSTs) anomalies surrounding the Hawai'ian Islands were near average during April. Average temperature anomalies were mixed. Another significant precipitation event occurred during the second week of the month resulting in heavy rain, upper elevation snow, and strong southerly winds. Precipitation was generally above to well above normal with small areas of below normal. Drought was limited to north central portions of the Big Island. Herbaceous green-up remained noticeable across the leeward sides because of the abundant precipitation the past two months.

The El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is expected to transition quickly from neutral to El Niño during the four-month outlook period. For Hawai'i, near to above normal temperature and precipitation anomalies are likely during the period. An increase in tropical cyclone activity across the eastern Pacific is likely due to the expected rapid transition towards El Niño and could influence the region's weather. Drought stress is likely to improve further with few impacts likely during the outlook period. Robust herbaceous green-up will likely serve as a heat sink during the next few months although some changes could create a spatial mix of flammability during what is typically the dry season. Normal significant fire potential is projected for the four-month outlook period for Hawai'i.

Southern California

After March saw historic heat over the West, a far more seasonable pattern prevailed in April with temperatures running near to only slightly above normal. April was a wet month as well, as despite the climatological dry season nearing its end, multiple rounds of wetting rain soaked the region. Central California in particular saw well above normal rainfall, while Southern California was closer to average, and desert areas remained drier. In terms of snow, the storms in April brought some meaningful snowfall to the higher elevations of the Sierra. However, this came after a near total wipeout of the snowpack in March, and one of the lowest April 1 snowpack readings ever recorded. As of late April, the snowpack for the central and southern Sierra was running about 25-30% of normal, which represents some improvement from earlier in the month.

There was a mixture of both offshore and onshore flow in April, which generally corresponded to the alternating warmer and cooler periods, respectively. A moderate Santa Ana wind event occurred early in the month, with the wind-driven Springs Fire burning over 4,000 acres in Riverside County during that event.

The latest U.S. Drought Monitor shows no drought conditions present over central and southern California, though abnormally dry conditions do exist in some areas mainly due to the extremely

hot and dry March. The recent and ongoing damp pattern should ensure no further degradations in drought and may yield improvements. Dead fuel moisture values generally trended near normal in April, with periodic rain yielding recoveries in fuel moisture after record dryness in March.

While April conditions were seasonable and supportive of grass growth, more grass curing than new growth occurred in April because the curing process had already been initiated in March. It is possible that new grass growth will occur in May due to lingering moisture from April and a continued supportive weather pattern. Brush live fuel moistures are highly varied. Some areas are just coming out of dormancy and seeing rapid live fuel moisture (LFM) increases. Conversely, some areas saw much earlier than normal LFM peaks due to the unusual March conditions and are already into drying trends well ahead of schedule. However, the ongoing pattern will stem these trends and may promote some further growth.

Current sea surface temperature (SST) anomalies in the tropical Pacific show rapidly evolving conditions. The weak La Niña event from this past winter has passed with neutral conditions currently present. However, there are strong indications from observational data and climate models that El Niño development is well underway. The latest projections suggest El Niño will begin later this spring and continue over the summer, with the chance of a strong El Niño by the fall increasing. Also of note are very warm SST anomalies extending from the California coast and southward. This is expected to reduce marine layer depth this spring. The shallower marine layer combined with the likelihood of a strong subtropical ridge this summer is expected to promote predominantly above normal temperatures through the summer months. Model projections are also now favoring above normal precipitation during the summer months.

The exceptional warmth observed in March led to a much earlier than normal start to “shoulder season” fire environment conditions over central and southern California. A considerable amount of grass fires, normally more typical of May, was observed in April. However, the current pattern is likely to ensure that despite the early shoulder season, the region will not experience an early start to peak season conditions. The lack of mountain snowpack over the region, along with the likelihood of a shallow marine influence and above normal summer temperatures, are both factors that could favor enhanced wildfire activity this summer. However, there are strong signals both from the current SST pattern and from model projections that favor unusually large amounts of moisture over the region this summer, with a well above normal risk of remnant tropical cyclones in addition to normal monsoon thunderstorms affecting the region. While the wet weather could bring significant lightning along with it, the typical result of wetter than normal summers is a reduction in fire activity over the region. There is also potential that the early curing of fine fuels this season could reduce fuel loading into the summer month as grasses undergo natural desiccation, another potential limiting factor this season. Given the mixed signals, near normal fire activity is projected for all four months across all Predictive Services Areas, which still represents a significant degree of fire activity during the summer months.

Northern Rockies

The outlook for May through June will be normal for significant wildland fire potential for the Northern Rockies Geographic Area (NRGA). In July, the lower elevations of the Idaho Panhandle will show above normal potential, with the remainder of the NRGA remaining normal. In August, above normal potential will include all the Idaho Panhandle and the Nez Perce-Bitterroot National Forests with the remainder of the NRGA normal. Significant uncertainty exists in the forecast for July and August due to possible tracks and amounts of monsoon moisture. Summer transition from La Niña to El Niño is associated with years that are not typically significant fire seasons in the NRGA, but the low snowpack this spring is dissimilar from the years that could be used for analogs. The current outlook utilizes Climate Prediction Center outlooks detailing the most likely portions of the western contiguous U.S. (CONUS) to see above normal temperatures and below normal moisture. Those outlooks currently highlight Idaho and the Pacific Northwest to be the most likely locations for hot and dry conditions.

The biggest drought changes in the NRGA in April resulted in expanded severe drought across southwest Montana with minor improvements over the northern half of Montana. Idaho has increased drought coverage in the panhandle. North Dakota continues to show no dryness signatures. Snowpack continues to be a concern especially for north Idaho and southwest Montana, where 50-70% of normal snowpack is reported. No basin in the NRGA is reporting normal snowpack. Snowpack above 6,000 feet is noticeably better than lower elevations.

Temperatures trended closer to normal in April than previous months with southwest Montana continuing to be a warm spot. Precipitation was closer to normal for southwest Montana though the moisture came in the form of thunderstorms a few days. Temperatures cooled sufficiently mid-month for snow to reach some valley floors. Northern Idaho has reported above normal precipitation and most of North Dakota is tracking above normal, as well. Northern Montana continues to be drier than most other locations.

Fire activity in April was mostly muted as a combination of precipitation events and the start of spring growth caused the landscape to become a less uniform fuel bed. One large fire occurred in south-central Montana as an anomalous day of near single digit relative humidity combined with slope and valley winds. The East Side Fire made significant slope-oriented runs on west facing aspects but significant activity was limited to one operational period as the slope orientation and weather became less favorable for fire growth. Prescribed fire at the beginning of the month began to decrease across the NRGA as burn windows became more challenging due to the green-up and precipitation events.

The progression of the La Niña to El Niño transition increases chances for normal springtime weather across the CONUS with three- to four-week outlooks leaning above normal for precipitation across the western NRGA, with even higher probabilities for southwest Montana. This forecast would support quieter fire activity into May, which supports the normal outlook. Leaning warmer and drier than normal is depicted for the western NRGA for the three-month outlook, but June and the first half of July are usually transition periods when growth of seasonal grasses ends and curing may start. Departures from this trend are driven by substantial heat waves, which are difficult to forecast for three to four months out. This forecast will trend the lower elevations of north Idaho to above normal significant fire potential in July and expand above normal potential to the rest of north Idaho and the Bitterroot National Forest in August. Locations farther south and east are better candidates to experience monsoon moisture, so confidence was too low to expand the above normal farther to the east.

Great Basin

After a historically warm March, which brought fuel moistures across the Great Basin region to record low levels, the pattern shifted in April with more Pacific storms bringing periods of cooler temperatures, rain, and higher elevation snowfall. This pattern will likely continue through much of May, bringing a return of green-up, which may last longer than normal in some areas. New fine fuel growth in the lower elevations could become a factor in the upcoming fire season.

Temperatures over the last 30 days have been several degrees warmer than average over the eastern half of the Great Basin and near normal over western areas. Precipitation has been well above normal in parts of central and western Idaho, Nevada, and central Utah. It has been much drier in far southern areas, with precipitation just 5-10% of average. The U.S. Drought Monitor has most of the Great Basin in moderate to severe drought, with broadening extreme drought in many areas of Utah and extreme to exceptional drought along the Nevada-Idaho border. The only areas that are abnormally dry are parts of the central Idaho mountains and far western Nevada. Snowpack remains near record low levels across the Great Basin, only 10-30% of normal, with a few basins near Arizona devoid of snow at all observed sites. The snowpack through the season has been notably higher in central and eastern Idaho and Wyoming, with current snowpack 50-70% of normal.

Fuel conditions have moderated from the record dryness levels that occurred in March, and are now trending near average in many areas, with fluctuations as storm systems move through bringing cooler temperatures and precipitation. After an early and short green-up in March due to the warmer and drier weather, green-up has returned in full force across the northern two-thirds of the Great Basin. Additional precipitation is expected to continue periodically in May, which should extend green-up and brings concerns of additional fine fuel growth. Higher carryover fine fuel loading exists in parts of southern and eastern Idaho, northern Nevada, and far northern Utah. Additional fine fuel growth is a concern in these areas through May, which would increase the overall fuel loading once a warmer and drier pattern emerges and grasses cure. Additional fine fuel growth is also possible along the Sierra Front as periods of precipitation continue. If a warmer and drier pattern develops by June, the lack of snowpack will result in grasses and brush drying out faster than normal.

Wildfire activity in the Great Basin has been near normal for this time of year, with small fires emerging on drier and windier days. Most fires have remained small, but the Goshen Fire in northern Utah burned just over 400 acres in grass and brush during a wind event in late April. Significant fire potential has been tempered by ongoing moisture but elevates briefly in any dead grass or brush on windy days.

As periods of precipitation perpetuate green-up through May, normal fire potential is expected in most areas. However, brief increases in fire potential are possible for a burning period in standing dead carryover and dried brush on windy days in southern Idaho, northern Nevada, and northern Utah. Persisting above normal fire potential may arise in May in the Arizona Strip as significant May precipitation looks to remain farther north. A drier pattern may emerge by June to allow fuels to move through the curing process. Once warmer and drier weather resumes, fuels are expected to dry out faster than normal due to the lack of snowpack in Utah and Nevada. Above normal fire potential is expected in the higher elevations of Utah and southern Nevada by June, and expand north and west into Idaho, western Wyoming, northern Nevada, and the Sierra Front by July and August. The main concerns will be in the higher elevations across the region and in the lower elevations of southern and eastern Idaho, northern Utah, and northern and western Nevada with significant carryover fine fuel loading and the potential for additional fine fuel growth this spring. The main uncertainties with fire potential heading into July and August will be the development of the North American Monsoon and any enhanced Pacific moisture that moves into the Great Basin with the developing El Niño.

Southwest

As April wrapped up, temperatures remained slightly above normal in the Southwest Geographic Area, with most of the region seeing values two to six degrees above average for the month. Precipitation-wise, the higher terrain fared a bit better, coming in near normal, whereas the lower elevations were slightly below normal. Climatologically, the southern areas of Arizona and New Mexico typically receive around 0.25 inches of precipitation, while northern areas average upwards of 1.5 inches in April.

A few isolated larger fires arose in the Southwest in April, mainly across forests with high timber mortality rates such as the Gila, along with several instances of larger, wind-driven grass fires focused on the plains in eastern New Mexico. Overall, however, wildfire activity in April remained on the lower side given the prolonged drought conditions and recent dry lightning and wind events.

Moving into May, the month will start wetter than normal. Despite the incoming moisture, the ongoing drought will require more than a single event to see meaningful improvement, especially as the driest time of year approaches. Temperatures are expected to remain near normal to start the month before warming to above normal by mid-May. Fuels continue to be dry following the record-breaking heat in March, though consistent green-up across the plains began at the end of

April. The early moisture and cooler temperatures should help support continued green-up in the plains.

As the El Niño-Southern Oscillation has transitioned from La Niña to neutral conditions, periods of troughing in the West will result in above-normal temperatures, scattered thunderstorms, and occasional breezy winds. Dry air near the surface will persist, and while upper-level moisture will support storm development, much of the precipitation is likely to evaporate before reaching the ground. Due to this combination, May and June will continue to have above normal significant fire potential across much of the region, with the exception of southwest Arizona and the eastern plains.

Looking ahead to July, current model guidance suggests the monsoon will arrive on time or slightly early, with areas along and east of the Continental Divide favored for earlier onset. With the arrival of this seasonal moisture, fire potential is expected to revert to normal for much of the region, despite temperatures that are expected to remain above normal throughout July. However, hot and dry conditions are expected to continue in northern Arizona, so above normal significant fire potential will persist there.

August shows similar signals to July, with near to slightly above normal monsoon moisture and a westward shift in the moisture plume that includes northern Arizona. Temperatures are expected to remain above normal regionwide. By this time, all of the region is expected to return to normal significant fire potential due to the monsoon.

Rocky Mountain

Unlike the past few months, the Rocky Mountain Area (RMA) saw more low-pressure systems move through in April, bringing more opportunities for precipitation. The increase in unsettled weather also produced more lightning activity, which led to several large fires. The cold fronts associated with the lows also brought more wind events, leading to periods of increased initial attack. Following a brief period of neutral conditions, a strong El Niño is expected to develop this summer, which could decrease the monsoon while also increasing tropical storm activity in the Pacific. Significant fire potential for May will remain normal, then increase above normal in the drought areas on the West Slope and Front Range of Colorado for June and July. August will likely see the above normal potential shift farther north with any potential monsoonal or tropical moisture.

The weather pattern became more active in April, which brought more storms through the RMA. This increase in storm activity helped break the trend of exceptional heat the RMA has experienced over the last six months. Most of the RMA was two to five degrees warmer than normal, an improvement over the five to ten degrees above normal that the area had observed in February and March. However, despite the more frequent storms, April was drier than average. Due to the drier weather, drought conditions across all five states in the RMA have continued to worsen. The biggest change over the last month was observed with the extreme drought in northeast Colorado expanding into much of western Nebraska.

Lack of snow cover in the mid to high elevations has left fine fuels available to burn. Fine fuels on the eastern plains of the geographic area reached historic dead fuel moisture minimums in the month of April. Some areas reached critical dead fuel moisture percentages typically seen in peak fire season. Dead fuel moisture across the West Slope into southwest Wyoming is below average for April, but not yet to critical levels. While dead fuel moisture is low, large diameter live fuel moisture above 8,500 feet of elevation remains above average. Windy and dry conditions continue to be the primary driver for large fire growth in the area.

April saw regular periods of moderate initial attack activity and large fire growth. Fire activity was concentrated in the eastern plains of Colorado through the Nebraska Panhandle and into South

Dakota. Large fires saw one to two active burn periods before resources were able to stop forward progression, usually in conjunction with abating winds. Most new ignitions were caused by lightning over the plains.

La Niña has ended as temperatures in the central Pacific Ocean have increased. This will lead to a brief period of neutral conditions expected in the May and June timeframe, returning precipitation to more normal values. Heat, however, is expected to continue across the RMA for the outlook period. An El Niño is expected to rapidly develop over the summer, as the temperatures in the Pacific will continue to increase. Typically, in past El Niño summers the western U.S. has seen a weaker traditional North American Monsoon, though the long-range forecast models are suggesting a more normal monsoon is still possible. El Niño patterns have also led to an increase in tropical storms in the Pacific Ocean that can bring moisture into the western U.S., but the moisture from these tropical storms is less certain than the traditional monsoon. With either scenario, the potential for increased moisture moving into the RMA will be in July and August. As any increased moisture makes it way into the RMA, this will shift the area most likely to see dry lightning on the edges of increased moisture north into Wyoming for August.

Green-up is progressing, though slower than normal due to the lack of moisture, and the live fuels will limit fire spread potential in May. Initial attack activity will likely be above normal in May as more fuels will be snow-free than in recent years. The green-up will start to fade and fuels will begin curing in June, leading the drought-stricken areas on the West Slope and Front Range of Colorado to above normal significant fire potential. This above normal potential will continue into July but may decrease later in the month as any potential monsoon or tropical moisture begins to influence the area. By August, the above normal potential will start to shift northward into southwestern Wyoming along the edge of any potential monsoon or tropical moisture.

Eastern Area

Normal significant fire potential is forecast for most of the Eastern Area through August. There are areas in long-term drought, including parts of Minnesota, eastern New England, and the Mid-Atlantic, particularly West Virginia. These areas could have elevated fire danger during windy days that follow dry periods, but enough precipitation is forecast to keep potential near normal in most areas for the next few months. The exception is western Minnesota, where blow-down fuels, cured grasses, winterkilled vegetation, and long-term drought combine with a likelihood of below normal precipitation to lead to elevated fire potential for May.

Significant rainfall totaling 5 to 12 inches across the Midwest reduced drought concerns from Iowa and Missouri eastward to Michigan and western Pennsylvania for the month of April. Precipitation was well below normal for the Ohio Valley and along much of the East Coast. Most of Minnesota was also dry, receiving only half of normal precipitation, which amounted to less than 1.5 inches of rain in most areas. Southern Illinois and Indiana were similarly dry, while West Virginia and the coast received a little more rain, but averaged only two inches for the month. Snowpack was slow melting in the northernmost reaches at the beginning of the month but was mostly gone by the third week of the month.

Despite some very cold outbreaks over the past month, temperatures were above normal across most of the region. In the northern Great Lakes and northeastern New England, temperatures were within a few degrees of normal, with only northwestern Minnesota below normal. Along the Ohio River Valley, temperatures averaged 7-10 degrees above normal for the month.

The U.S. Drought Monitor shows that drought persists across fewer portions of the Eastern Area than last month. The band from the Iowa-Missouri border eastward to Lake Erie has moderated, while the area from southeast Missouri through southern Illinois, into West Virginia and the Mid-Atlantic coast has intensified with extreme and severe drought becoming more widespread along the Ohio River. Most other areas remain the same as last month. Compared to last year at this

time, there is more drought in the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast, but less across the Midwest. These dry conditions are reflected in soil moisture data, as well as in observed and forecasted fire danger values, with Ohio, West Virginia, and western Minnesota all showing moderately dry to very dry fuels.

Fire activity increased in April, which is normal since spring is usually the busiest part of fire season in the Eastern Area. Much of the Great Lakes saw increased activity, with some intense fire behavior in Minnesota during windy and dry periods. Along the Ohio River Valley and Mid-Atlantic, a few more active days have been observed, but still trended close to typical behavior for this time of year despite the dry fuels. In the Northeast, a consistently cool and damp pattern has kept conditions in check until recently, when warmer weather the last week of April led to an uptick in activity, with more rapid fire spread than expected in parts of Vermont.

Overall temperatures forecast by the Climate Prediction Center (CPC) are expected to be below normal for the entire Eastern Area for the first two weeks of May. After that, a warmup is expected in the last half of the month. Precipitation amounts are expected to be lower than normal for the west, centered around Minnesota, while wetter than normal conditions are likely for New England. For the last half of May, precipitation is likely to fall into a more normal pattern with some rain expected for the Midwest and a drier pattern in the east. For June through August, temperatures are expected to be above normal in the Northeast and normal in other areas, while precipitation amounts show no favored category anywhere in the region.

For the majority of the Eastern Area, this outlook period continues with the spring fire season. Fire activity will depend on the frequency of precipitation and wind events through May as fuels continue to green-up. The drought along the Ohio River Basin, the Mid-Atlantic, and the Northeast is concerning, but overall conditions in these areas are expected to be typical for this time of year. In areas of long-term drought, green-up is less of a deterrent to fire spread, and there will be shortened times before curing begins and live fuel moisture drops to levels that cause increased fire behavior upon ignition. Minnesota is of most concern due to heavy concentration of dead, blowdown fuels from last year's derecho and the persistence of a dry pattern creating moderate drought across much of the state. With a forecast for continued dry and often windy weather and alignment with the "spring dip" in pine species, fire potential for much of Minnesota will be above normal for May, with normal conditions returning upon green-up for June and the rest of the summer.

Southern Area

Impacts from extreme to exceptional drought have increased across the Southern Area through mid-spring and are likely to continue for the foreseeable future. The fire environment will improve temporarily during occasional wetter periods in May and June, but a sustained abnormally wet pattern will be required to end significant fire potential in the region. Heading into summer, El Niño's influence will increase across most of the Gulf coastal plain, and flash drought development or intensification of existing drought is likely to enhance wildfire activity in the pine-dominant region. Many of these areas also have compounding fuel issues from previous drought and beetle kill, recent ice or convective storms, and hurricane damage from the past decade. Fuels from Hurricane Helene will increasingly contribute to fire activity where drought persists through the outlook period.

The spring peak in fire activity for the coastal Southeast typically aligns with the onset of the rainy season in May, as lightning activity contributes to new fires and thunderstorm outflows or sea breezes enhance fire growth. Long-term drought from the now defunct multi-year La Niña has left fuels, swamps, and the region's organic soils parched, with areas from southeast Virginia and the Carolinas to South Georgia, Florida, and far southern Alabama primed for above normal significant fire potential. Areas with persistent exceptional drought may also experience tree mortality that could contribute newly available fuels, while freeze-cured vegetation has enhanced

fire activity as far south as the Everglades. Established large fires throughout South Georgia and North Florida are burning as deep as three to five feet down into the duff layer and may be on the landscape for months, re-emerging in above-ground fuels during drier and hotter weather. Scorched pines will also drop their needles, which may bring fire back to some previously burned areas. These conditions will not improve appreciably until the area experiences multiple weeks of well above normal rainfall, which is of low confidence.

Dryness across the Gulf coastal plain may be enhanced this summer due to the rapid onset of a potentially high-end El Niño. The strongest El Niños since 1997 have been progressively hotter during summer for most of the Gulf Coast, culminating in the extreme heat, low rainfall, and dry air observed from June through August 2023. Assuming this warming trend continues, any relief in the next several weeks may be quickly erased by flash drought as early as June but is more likely in July and August. The stronger El Niño becomes, the more likely we are to see fewer tropical storms and hurricanes develop in the Atlantic this year. While it would just take one system to bring significant relief, lower odds for development may decrease the potential for landfalling systems during the hurricane season.

As such, above normal significant fire potential during June is forecast to continue from South Georgia into Florida and is likely to develop over southeast Texas and western Louisiana. By July and August, heat waves, drier than normal weather, and lingering impacts from the current drought will bring an expansive area of above normal significant fire potential to the southern tier of the region, extending from the Texas Hill Country to south Florida. Confidence is a bit lower by August farther north in Florida and South Georgia, with wetter conditions generally favored over the Appalachian states and Atlantic coast during summer.

Leaf-out in the Appalachians and Piedmont should reduce the areas at risk for significant fires the next few months, but sufficient drought relief has not occurred in most of the region to call the end of spring fire season. Drought stress that occurred during the most crucial time of the growing season could also show itself during any extended periods of hot and dry weather this summer. Meanwhile, recent cool temperatures have slowed green-up in the highest elevations of North Carolina and Virginia, and additional freezes may be possible in early May. The underlying and unusual dryness for this time of year could maintain some risk for problematic fires in the region, especially for areas most severely impacted by Hurricane Helene. Heavy dead fuels have been consuming entirely in recent fires throughout the Southeast, and there are widespread reports of fires re-emerging a month or two after being controlled or contained. These issues will continue to pop up until drought improves by at least two categories.

Widespread extreme and locally exceptional drought farther north from the High Plains of Texas and Oklahoma into the Mid-Mississippi Valley is being thwarted somewhat by areas of green-up and a cooler start to May. Any heat stress similar to what is expected for the Gulf coastal plain this summer could bring the return of above normal significant fire potential, but confidence is a bit lower than farther south. Southeastern Oklahoma into southern Arkansas and north Mississippi may be most at risk for increasing fire activity in July and August, and these areas will be monitored closely for subsequent outlooks.

Outlook Objectives

The National Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook is intended as a decision support tool for wildland fire managers, providing an assessment of current weather and fuels conditions and how these will evolve in the next four months. The objective is to assist fire managers in making proactive decisions that will improve protection of life, property, and natural resources, increase fire fighter safety and effectiveness, and reduce firefighting costs.

For questions about this outlook, please contact the National Interagency Coordination Center at (208) 387-5400 or contact your local Geographic Area Predictive Services unit.

Note: Additional Geographic Area assessments may be available at the specific GACC websites. The GACC websites can also be accessed through the NICC webpage at:
http://www.nifc.gov/nicc/predictive/outlooks/outlooks.htm