National Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook

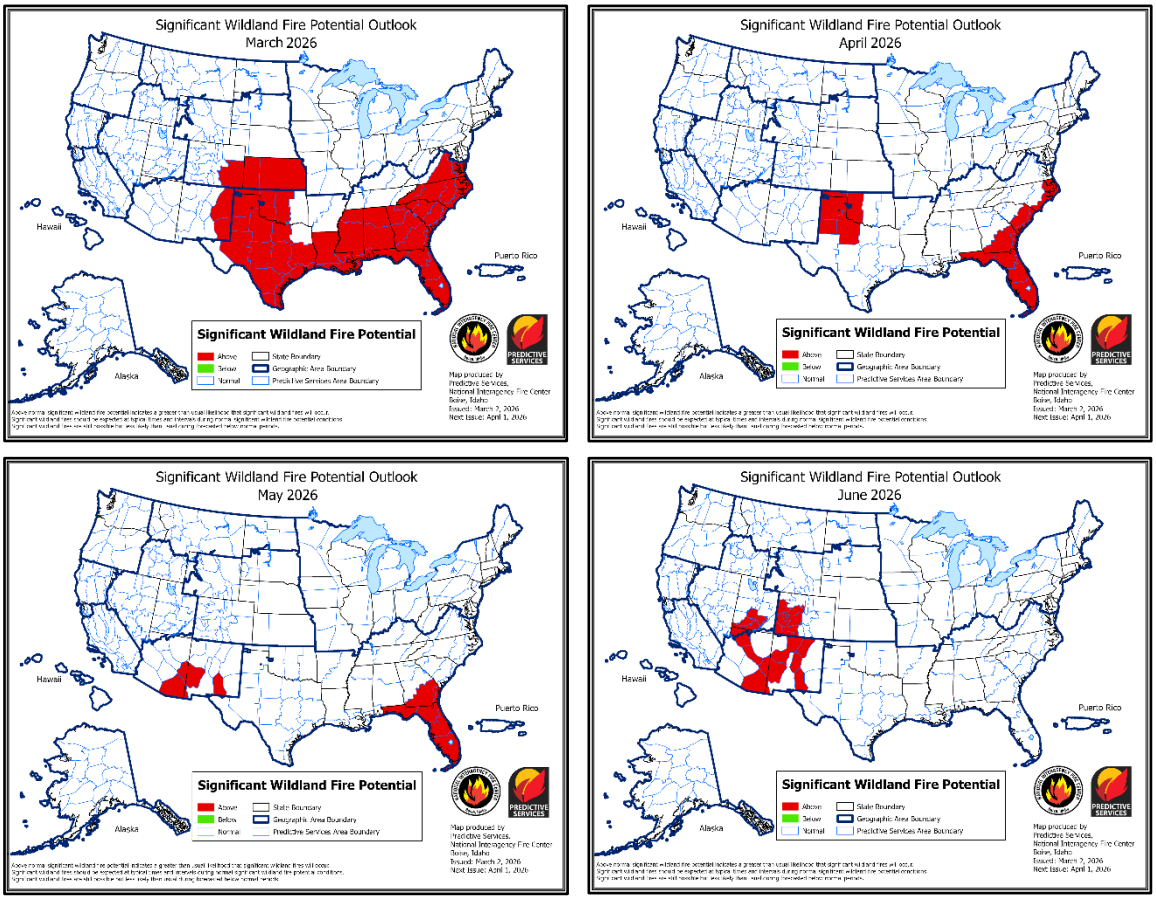
Predictive Services
National Interagency Fire Center

Issued: March 2, 2026
Next Issuance: April 1, 2026

Outlook Period – March through June 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 remained at low levels across the U.S. in February but increased modestly the latter half of the month. The most notable increase in activity occurred in the Southern Area, which increased its geographic area preparedness level to three (on a scale of 1-5) February 24. Other areas that had more modest increases in activity were the Northern Rockies, Rocky Mountain, Southwest, and Eastern Areas. However, the National Preparedness Level remained at one (on a scale of 1-5) due to the low level of activity nationally and availability of resources. As of February 27, 385,991 acres have burned across the country, which is 422% of the previous 10-year average. So far this year 7,895 fires have been reported, also well above average, at 183%.

February precipitation was below normal across most of the U.S., with well below normal precipitation observed across portions of the Midwest, Southwest, South Texas, and Florida.

Precipitation was slightly above normal from central California northward into Oregon and the Columbia Basin, with small areas of above normal precipitation from North Dakota eastward into Upper Michigan, northern Arizona, southeast Colorado, and northwest Kansas. Overall drought increased across the country due to the dry conditions with just over 51% of the U.S. now in drought. Drought persisted, intensified, or developed in much of the northwestern U.S. into the central and central Plains, Mid-Mississippi Valley, and Southeast. Drought improvement was limited to small areas, most notably in southern New Mexico and Virginia.

Climate Prediction Center and Predictive Services outlooks issued in late February forecast temperatures are likely to be above normal in March across the southern two-thirds of the U.S., with below normal temperatures likely in Alaska and small portions of the Northwest and northern Plains. Precipitation is likely to be above normal from the Great Lakes to the Mid-Mississippi Valley and portions of the southern and central Plains. The following three months from April to June, temperatures are likely to be above normal for most of the U.S. except the northern tier and Alaska, with temperatures most likely to be above normal in the Greater Four Corners. Precipitation is likely to be below normal across most of the West, with small areas of above normal precipitation in the eastern Great Lakes and Southeast.

Normal significant fire potential is forecast for the northern half of the U.S. into June. For the southern half of the country, a large area of above normal significant fire potential is forecast in March from the southern Rockies into the southern Plains and much of the Southeast. In April, most of this area will return to normal except for portions of North Texas, western Oklahoma, the southeast Atlantic Coast, and Florida. For May, above normal potential will persist in South Georgia and Florida, with above normal potential added for southeast Arizona and the White, Gila, and Sacramento Mountains of the Southwest. In June, Florida and South Georgia will return to normal potential, but above normal potential will expand across the Colorado West Slope and the higher elevations of the Southwest and southern Utah.

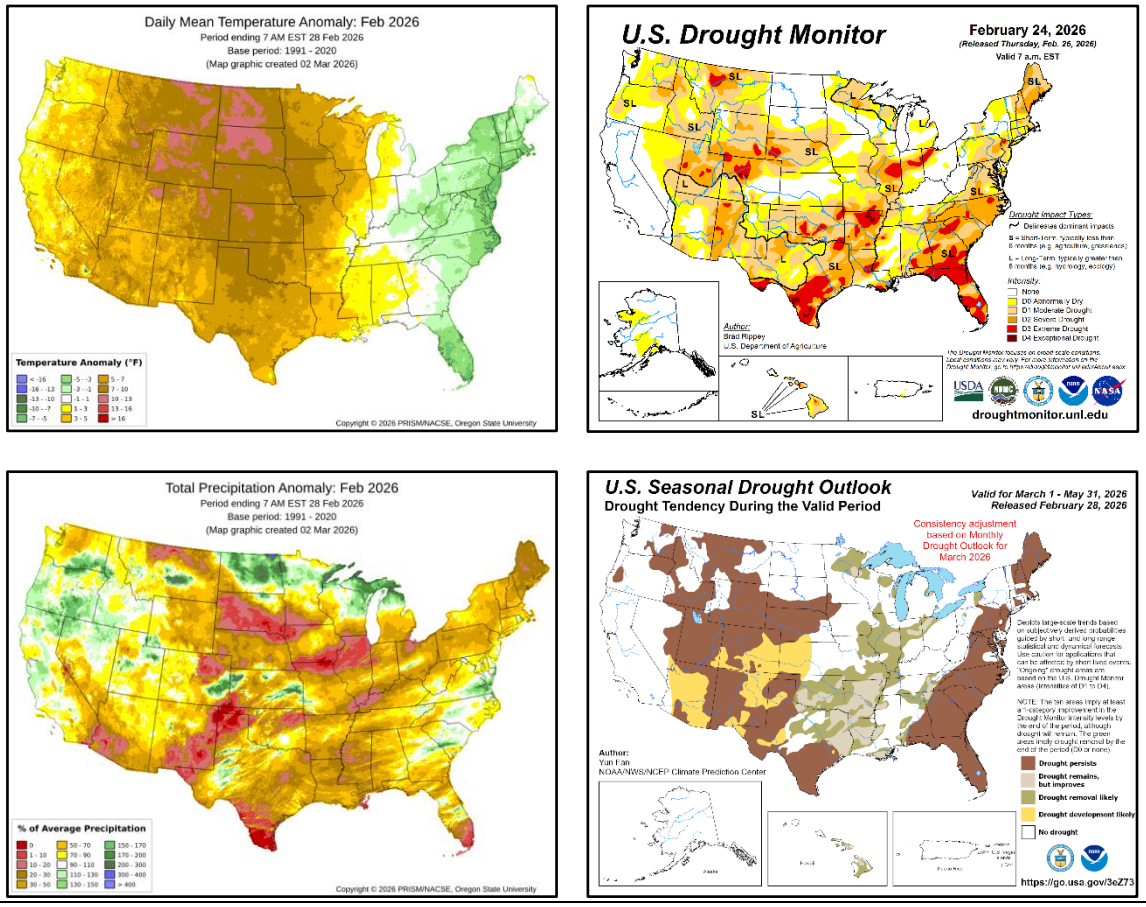
Past Weather and Drought

Temperatures in February were well above normal for most of the West eastward into the Mississippi Valley, with temperatures more than 12°F above normal for portions of the northern and central Rockies into the northern half of the Plains. Temperatures were below normal for most of the Appalachians to East Coast except for the northern half of Maine which was near to above normal. Temperatures were generally near normal across Alaska, although portions of southwest Alaska were below normal with the panhandle and Kenai Peninsula above normal. Hawai'i temperatures averaged near normal most of the month except for western portions of the Big Island which was slightly above normal.

Precipitation was below normal across most of the U.S. for February. Precipitation less than 25% of normal was observed across portions of north-central Montana, from South Dakota southeast to northern Missouri and Illinois, the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles, southeast New Mexico, South Texas, and South Florida. Central California north into Oregon, the Columbia Basin and Snake River Plain received near to above normal precipitation. Otherwise, above normal precipitation was limited to North Dakota eastward into Upper Michigan and small portions of central Montana, northern Arizona, southeast Colorado, and Kansas. Precipitation in Alaska was mostly above normal, especially across the central and eastern Interior where repeated rounds of heavy snow fell at the end of the month. Hawai'i precipitation was generally above normal, especially across eastern portions of Maui and the northern half of the Big Island.

While fire activity remined low across the U.S., the modest increase late in the month was associated with some significant events. February 17 saw a fire outbreak on the central and southern Plains with large fires across New Mexico, Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma,

and Texas, with the Ranger Road fire burning over 280,000 acres across Oklahoma and Kansas. Other wind events produced large fires in southern Missouri February 24, with a strong downslope wind event in central Montana February 26 resulting in numerous fires. Outside of these fire effective events, significant snow fell across portions of the East Coast, with heavy snow across North Carolina that ended February 1, and a strong Nor'easter that brought very heavy snow to the coastal Mid-Atlantic and southern New England February 22-23. Numerous locations recorded more than two feet of snow, with the T.F. Green International Airport in Providence, Rhode Island breaking its all-time record for snowfall from a storm at 37.9 inches.



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)***.

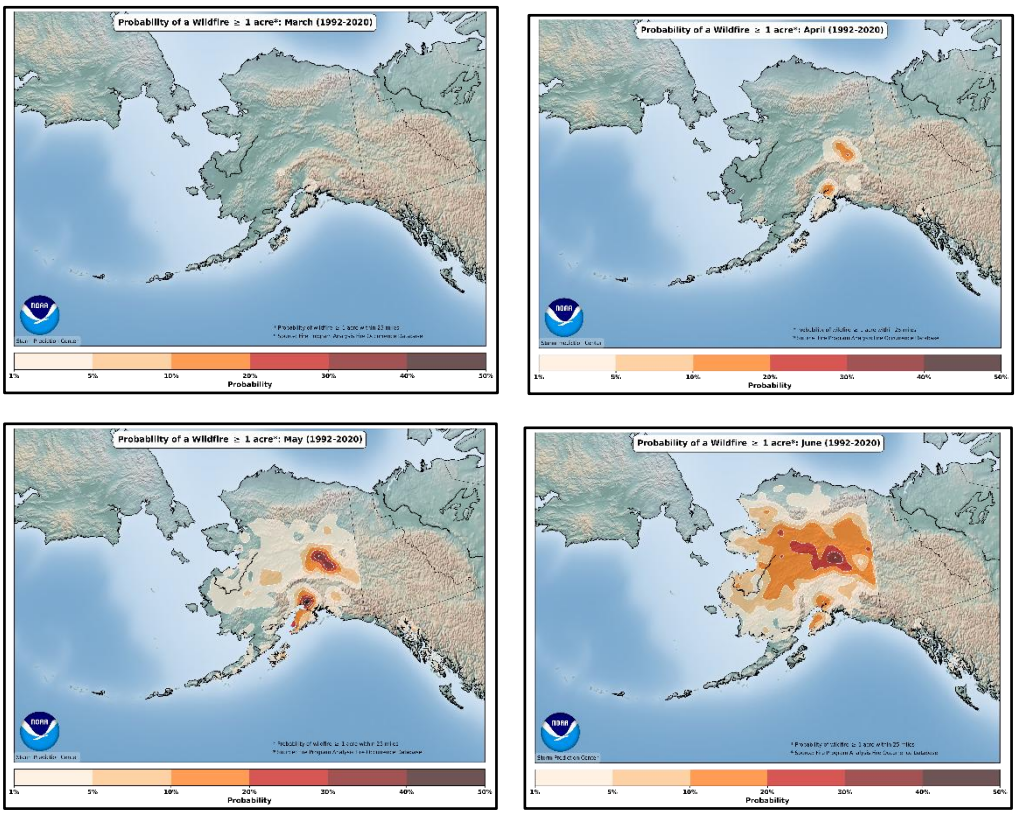
Overall drought increased across the U.S. during February with more than 51% of the country in drought as of February 24. Drought intensified in much of Montana and Wyoming, with drought development and/or intensification into portions of Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado. Much of the central and southern Plains into the Southeast also observed an increase in drought during the month. Drought also intensified across much of Illinois, Iowa, and northeast Missouri, as well as small portions of Pennsylvania eastward into southern New England. Drought improvement was limited to small areas of southern New Mexico, southern Missouri, western Tennessee, Virginia, and Maryland. Areas of extreme drought have expanded across the U.S. and can now be found in 22 states. The most extensive extreme drought is in South Texas, Florida, South Georgia, and northern Arkansas. Small areas of exceptional drought exist in northern Arkansas, central Colorado, the Big Bend, and South Texas. Drought persists across much of the southern Hawai'ian Islands, but with some improvement over the past month. Drought is expected to persist where it exists across East Coast and Lower Mississippi Valley into East Texas., with development expected in the southern High Plains and much of the Southwest and

Four Corners where it does not yet exist. Drought improvement is expected in portions of the central and southern Plains into the Mid-Mississippi Valley, and Great Lakes.

Weather and Climate Outlooks

The El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) remains in a weak La Niña state, but sea surface temperatures (SSTs) continue to warm, with abundant warming showing up below the surface. The CPC forecasts La Niña to transition to ENSO-neutral conditions this month, with ENSO-neutral conditions expected to persist through spring. The negative phase of the Pacific Decadal Oscillation (PDO) continues to weaken, with the negative phase the weakest it has been in the past several years and it is likely to have less impact on this forecast than prior years. The Madden-Julian Oscillation (MJO) is weak and may briefly strengthen in the western Pacific in March, but it is not expected to be a significant player in the outlook. The transition from La Niña to ENSO-neutral conditions will be the main driver of this outlook.

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. Ample rain, snow, and cold temperatures will keep fire activity minimal into April, with small, human-caused fire activity increasing in May and peaking in late June, which is normal for Alaska's fire season.

This winter has seen very deep snowpack for much of the Interior, and mostly near-normal amounts elsewhere. Parts of Bristol Bay and south-central Alaska are the exception, with more winter rain than snow leading to a lower snowpack.

The U.S. Drought Monitor has elevated some areas to abnormally dry around the Seward Peninsula and inland to the central western Interior, as well as parts of southwest to south-central Alaska, including the Anchorage Bowl and Kenai Peninsula. This concern has been increasing throughout the last six months.

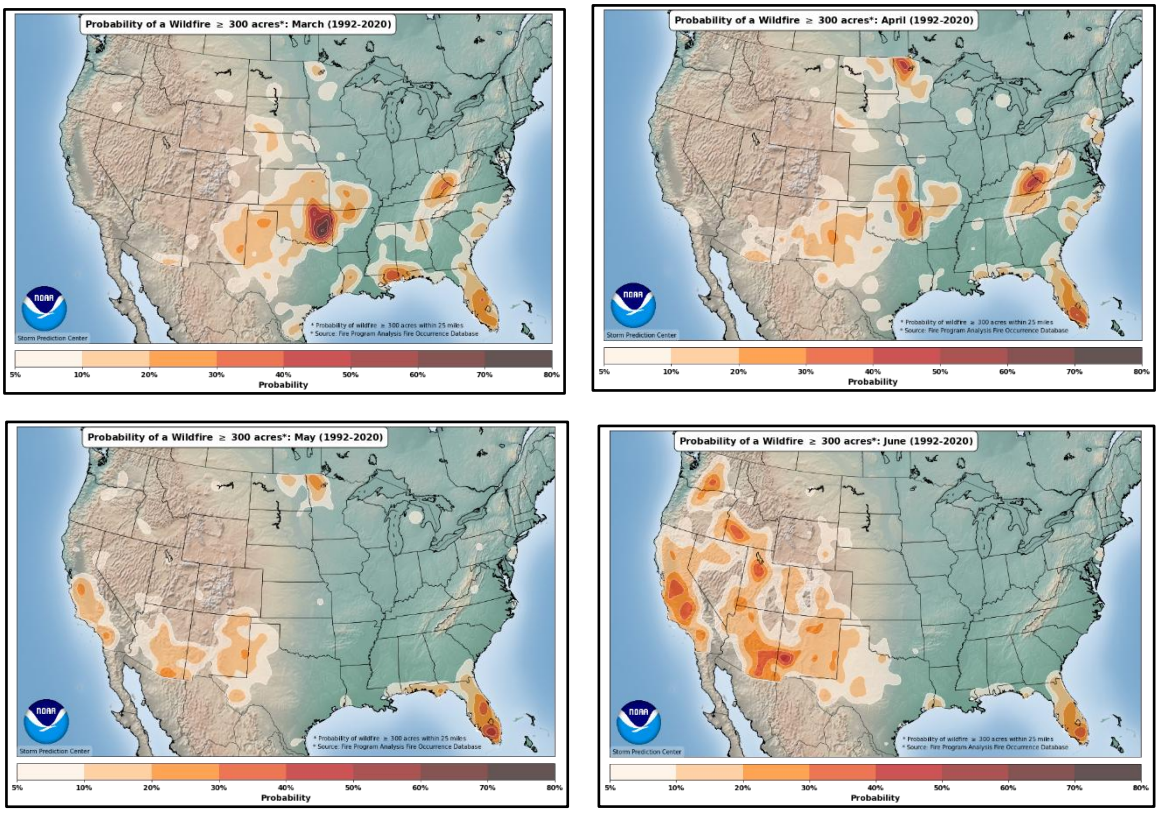
Climate Prediction Center forecasts for March indicate the likelihood of colder than normal temperatures for most of the state. For April and beyond, some slices of the periphery of the state may lean towards warmer and wetter than normal at times, but equal chances for all conditions prevail. Overall, this indicates that the snowpack will stick around until late in the spring for most areas, leading to a predominantly normal start to the season.

El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) conditions are forecast to shift from a weak La Niña this winter to a weak El Niño in summer. Weak ENSO conditions correlate with generally smaller fire seasons in Alaska, but larger seasons have also occurred under weak ENSO conditions.

Despite a warming climate, fire season in Alaska remains virtually non-existent in winter months, and these temperature or precipitation leanings in the winter do not have much impact on the summer fire season, which is instead more dependent on springtime (April-May) temperatures and melt rates.

Fire activity has been nonexistent in February with no new ignitions. Fuels are snow-covered across the state. Fire weather indices have been turned off due to snowpack. Parts of south-central and southwest Alaska have a lower snowpack, but a cool March will keep snowmelt from happening too early.

Alaska’s permanent winter snowpack will remain across the mainland through March. Fire potential will remain near zero through March, with a small increase in small human caused fires at the end of April, followed by a gradual uptick in mid to late May, with a peak the end of June. This describes normal fire conditions for Alaska.



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

February's warm and dry start was partially offset by a more active weather pattern during the latter half of the month. Dead fuel moistures improved in response and are now closer to 20-year averages. As a result, fire danger in March is expected to remain at a seasonally low threat level.

January's exceedingly warm and dry conditions persisted through the first half of February, with temperatures well above average and very little rainfall. The strong upper ridge eventually weakened, allowing cooler, wetter weather to return and bring conditions closer to normal. Even so, monthly average temperatures ended a few to several degrees above normal, with the warmest anomalies, three to five degrees above average, across the Cascades and southern and eastern Oregon. Precipitation totals, while not as poor as January, still finished below average across most of the geographic area. A few pockets in the far western Columbia Basin and western Oregon were slightly above average, and the southwestern half of the Olympic Peninsula performed best, ending at 110% to 130% percent of average.

Snowpack remains near or at record lows despite increasing precipitation late in the month. Snow levels have generally stayed elevated, keeping meaningful snow water equivalent (SWE) accumulation mostly above 5,000 feet. As in January, most basins report less than 40% of late-February median SWE, and numerous stations remain below 30%. Only far north-central and northeast Washington show basin-wide averages approaching median, and even those gains are primarily above 5,500 feet. This year's snow accumulation pattern most closely resembles 2015, followed by 2005.

The U.S. Drought Monitor showed little change between late January and late February. Portions of eastern Washington, northeast Oregon, and the Umpqua Basin in southwest Oregon continue to be classified as moderate to severe drought. These regions will require prolonged rainfall or unseasonably high spring snow totals to recover. Remaining areas are listed as abnormally dry or show no drought designation.

Fire activity across the Pacific Northwest remained minimal in February. Most reported wildfires were isolated human-caused ignitions that were contained quickly and held to under one acre. These were typical winter surface-fuel fires that responded rapidly to suppression. Early in the month, a few prescribed burns showed more active fire behavior than expected, driven by drier-than-normal fine fuels and occasional low humidity. Prescribed-fire operations continued whenever weather conditions allowed.

Dry conditions west of the Cascades kept Energy Release Component (ERC) at daily record levels through the first half of February before they trended back toward average or below average later in the month. East of the Cascades, ERCs generally remained below average, though parts of southeast Oregon were elevated at the beginning of the month before dropping.

Rapid warming of Niño 3.4 Region sea surface temperatures in recent weeks signals a faster transition from La Niña to El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO)-neutral to start meteorological spring. The Climate Prediction Center (CPC) projects an active Pacific storm track continuing through March, likely resulting in near to above normal precipitation across much of Oregon and Washington. As the region moves into April, these signals weaken as ENSO-neutral conditions take hold and forecast confidence decreases. By May and June, CPC indicates equal chances, reflecting no strong temperature or precipitation signal. Confidence is therefore lowest for the two most critical months leading into the Northwest Geographic Area's typical fire season.

March is expected to feature mild to cool temperature anomalies, particularly across western Washington, though these trends should weaken heading into April. May is more likely to run warmer than average, increasing drying rates if precipitation is limited. By June, CPC indicates equal chances, with no clear temperature signal present.

March retains a slight tilt toward above-normal precipitation. Confidence decreases for April, and by May and June CPC shows equal chances, indicating that precipitation outcomes will depend more on individual weather systems than on longer-range climate patterns.

The Northwest Geographic Area continues to indicate normal significant fire potential through March and April. May and June bring decreasing confidence in the overall climate pattern, but not enough signal to justify deviating from a normal outlook. More than usual, late-spring and early-summer fire activity and intensity will depend heavily on short-term precipitation patterns rather than snowpack alone. From an ENSO perspective, 2018 remains the leading analog year for 2026 expectations. However, from a winter snowpack standpoint, 2015 and 2005 are the closest matches.

Northern California and Hawai'i

Significant fire potential is projected to be normal from March through June for both Hawai'i and northern California. With this forecast, large fire occurrence in northern California from March through May is expected to similar to the historic average of less than one large fire within each Predictive Service Area (PSA) for the combined three-month period. While increasing seasonally, large fire occurrence in June is expected to remain near the monthly average of 12 large fires arising throughout the northern California PSAs.

February began unusually warm and dry in northern California due to a blocking ridge, but the jet stream became active ushering a series of storm systems across the region from February 8 through the end of the month. There were a couple of atmospheric river periods with the strongest occurring February 21-24. Precipitation anomalies were mixed. Average temperatures were also mixed but generally near to above normal. Nearly 1,700 lightning strikes were observed in February using the Vaisala detection system, with almost 1,500 occurring the last day of the month, which was well above the monthly average of 280 strikes (from 2000-2025 Vaisala data). There were two dry northerly and easterly wind periods with the strongest on February 9. There were four gusty southerly wind events, but elevated relative humidity helped mitigate fire risk. No National Weather Service Red Flag Warnings or Predictive Service High-Risks were issued during the month.

Dead fuels were unusually flammable for the time of year during the first week of February then transitioned toward near to above normal from February 11-16 and remained that way the rest of the month. The shrub growing season initiated unusually early with leaf-out observed in many species below 1,000 to 2,000 feet, while dormancy continued elsewhere. Herbaceous green-up remained pronounced below 3,500 to 4,000 feet and provided a fire spread barrier while dormancy and a cured state was generally found above 4,000 feet. The amount of dead grass from the 2025 growing season continued to show reduction with very little left over overall. The amount of moisture found within the snowpack increased from 45-60% normal January 31 to 50-70% normal February 26. Snow cover fluctuated during the month with an unusually cold winter storm lowering levels as low as 500 to 2,000 feet during February 18-19. Snow cover was generally found above 3,400-4,400 feet February 26 depending on aspect/canopy cover and was slightly lower compared to the start of February. No drought conditions existed during February based on the U.S. Drought Monitor. The two-month Evaporative Demand Drought Index (EDDI) value on February 21 showed dryness markers across the far north.

Wildfire business was minimal most of February, with most wildfires arising during the first week of the month. The daily wildfire ignition average during February was less than one, which is less than the February 2008-2025 daily ignition average of nearly two. No significant fires were reported during February. The largest wildfire was 11 acres found northeast of Alturas in dormant grass and brush February 6. The regional large fire average for February from 1992-2024 is 0.24, or very low. The regional preparedness level remained at one in February. Prescribed burning was most active during the first two weeks of the month although projects were implemented throughout the month. Weather played a suppressive role in terms of restricting access and/or creating too moist of an environment for burning during the latter half of the month. Pile burning was the dominant type, while broadcast burns were also implemented during the first week.

Several of the model and analog guidance tools suggest a drier tilt during March with unusual amounts of northerly and/or offshore wind events. Then, alternating dry-warm and cool-moist periods are likely in April although modeling shows less anomaly consensus during April. Forecast confidence for May and June is lower due to less consensus amongst the modeling tools although the analogs suggest a warmer and drier tilt for May.

Based on the current fuel state and future weather predictions for northern California, normal significant fire potential is projected March through June. During June, large fire occurrence historically increases from the minimal amounts typically observed during March through May. Critically flammable live and dead fuel alignments are likely to be minimal during the four-month outlook although some extended dry and warm periods are likely to create unusually flammable conditions. Snow cover is likely to come off earlier than normal, therefore drying out the fuel bed early. This should initially benefit prescribed burning but perhaps curtail burning late spring into early summer if timely moisture intrusions do not materialize. Transitional green-up in the shrub-tree canopy and herbaceous fuel types should keep significant fire potential more muted during the outlook period although noticeable curing will occur across the lower elevations during May

and June, thereby increasing the spread potential in the grassland and oak savannah fuel regimes. Initial attack activity may be above normal during May and June due to the possibility of fine fuel loading being above normal.

Sea surface temperature (SST) anomalies surrounding the Hawai'ian Islands were generally above average during February. Average temperature anomalies were mixed but generally near to above normal with a below normal tilt across portions of Molokai and Maui. Substantial storm activity increased during February with precipitation anomalies generally near to above normal across most of the island chain. The most significant precipitation event occurred February 7-9 due to a slow-moving front. Strong wind periods also occurred throughout the month, but they were accompanied by higher relative humidity. Drought intensity and coverage improved compared to late January although moderate to extreme ratings remained over portions of Molokai, Maui, and the Big Island. Herbaceous green-up remained mixed across the leeward sides although several locations responded to the additional precipitation. No Red Flag Warnings were issued by the National Weather Service in Hawai'i during February. Notable fire activity in mostly cured grass occurred February 4-6 south of highway 200 in the Big Island.

The El Nino Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is expected to transition quickly from a weak La Nina to a neutral state during the next month and likely remain neutral during the rest of the outlook period. Near to above normal temperature anomalies are expected in Hawai'i. Precipitation anomalies should be near to above normal. Drought stress is likely to lessen or improve even further while herbaceous green-up across most leeward locations serves as a fire spread inhibitor. Therefore, normal significant fire potential is projected throughout the islands for the four-month outlook period.

Southern California

February in the Southern California Geographic Area was characterized by a warm and dry beginning, a cold and stormy midsection, and renewed warmth and dryness at its tail end. The prevalence of the warmer periods led the monthly temperature to be one to four degrees above average in most of the region. While dry weather was predominant in duration, a powerful sequence of Pacific storms rocked the state during the third week of the month, which led to monthly precipitation being near or above normal in most of the region except for the deserts which remained drier. These storms provided a needed boost for snowpack across the Sierra, which had fallen well below normal but is now near to only a little below normal for the central and southern Sierra. Much needed snowfall also occurred over the Southern California mountains, which had been severely short on snow thus far due to high snow levels during previous storms.

Periods of weak to moderate Santa Ana winds occurred through the first half of February, continuing the prevailing offshore flow regime of January. Onshore flow prevailed over the second half of the month, and powerful south to west winds were observed during the mid-month storm sequence, producing some damage.

The latest U.S. Drought Monitor shows that there are no drought conditions over California, a reflection of the regular occurrences of significant rainfall since the fall, and the cumulative effects of years of strong wet seasons. This is set to mark the fourth winter in a row of near to above normal precipitation across most of California.

A long period of unseasonably warm and dry weather in January persisted into early February, reducing dead fuel moistures to well below normal levels. However, the major storm sequence in mid-February brought a dramatic reversal in that trend. Steady drying was back underway to end February as a warmer and drier pattern settled back in.

Live fuel moistures are generally running above normal across the region due to several rounds of significant rainfall interspersed with periods of warm and dry weather, a highly favorable combination for vegetation growth. Dormancy remains present across the mid and higher elevations, although green-up should steadily start to progress upward in elevation in March. Heavy grass loading is likely this spring. Warmer than normal weather and moist soils should lead to significant fine fuel growth in the coming weeks, which will combine with existing growth from the early season rain.

El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) conditions remain in a weak La Niña but are expected to become ENSO-neutral shortly. With the lack of any strong signal, ENSO is not expected to be a significant factor for our region this spring and summer. Recent warming trends and climate model projections suggest the likely development of a weak to moderate El Niño event this summer, which may become a factor for our region next fall and winter. Model projections are favoring near to slightly below normal precipitation over the next few months. This is favored in the regional forecast, as well. The absence of major maritime polar storminess and expected prevalence of high pressure should also keep temperatures above average overall. While additional major storm sequences are looking less likely this season, cut-off upper-level low pressure and weak troughs should still bring a couple rounds of wetting rainfall to most areas before true dry season onset. By later April and through the spring, dry weather is likely to prevail. Sea surface temperatures (SSTs) off the California coast are a little warmer than average. While plenty of “May Gray” and “June Gloom” conditions are likely this spring, the marine layer should overall be a little shallower than normal due to these warmer waters. This is also in stark contrast to last spring, when well below normal SSTs off the California coast brought a near-historically deep marine layer and well below normal temperatures west of the coastal slopes for much of the spring. A repeat of that is not expected this year.

March and April are traditionally months of very little fire activity across central and southern California, and that will be the case this year as green-up provides strong and widespread barriers to fire spread. Fire activity tends to increase sharply by May and June, especially across the lower elevations as grasses cure. The expected high grass loading and above normal temperatures raises the possibility of above normal fire activity in the grass-dominated landscapes this spring. However, high live fuel moisture in the brush will be a limiting factor in grass-shrub fuel types. In addition, cool and moist Pacific intrusions, which have been common in the spring months in recent years, may also be limiting factors and preclude any above normal highlights at this time. Across the mountains, significant seasonal rainfall, high live fuel moisture, and a fair snowpack should keep fire potential near or even a little below normal levels heading into the early summer. Considering all factors, near normal activity is favored for all areas, which should mean a steady increase in fire activity by the latter half of spring.

Northern Rockies

Significant wildland fire potential is expected to remain normal across the Northern Rockies Geographic Area (NRGA) through the March through June outlook period. Sporadic wind-driven, lower elevation fires might occur throughout the outlook period but not with enough frequency to trigger an above normal forecast. Warm temperatures continued into February with dryness persisting for a majority of the region. The latter half of February improved with westerly flow supporting rounds of rain and snow, but accumulations were not sufficient to reverse dry trends that started in December. Soil moisture metrics indicate moisture that was delivered by fall weather systems is present in the landscape and is slowing the progression of drought despite the exceptional two-month run of weather.

Most of Montana and Idaho continue to keep pace with the warmest all-time winters, and North Dakota reported temperatures 7 to 13 degrees above normal in February. This warmth and a lack

of recent moisture have pushed snowpack to 70-80% of normal with most of the snow being held above 6,000 to 8,000 feet and much less snow in the mid-slopes. Precipitation was slightly below normal for north Idaho and western Montana in February. The majority of Montana east of the Continental Divide reported another month of less than 50% of normal precipitation. There was a heavy snow event that impacted an area roughly bounded by Lewistown, Harlowton, and Roundup, which placed that area in a surplus for February. North Dakota also experienced a surplus, although the southwest corner of the state was much drier.

The U.S. Drought Monitor shows the fastest drying occurring over southern Montana with a general slower drying trend in north Idaho and the rest of Montana. North Dakota is showing no drought. Eastern Montana is beginning to show a large area of abnormally dry conditions. Most of central Montana now reports moderate drought with an area of extreme drought in north central Montana in the lee of the mountains. Western Montana has seen abnormal dryness return while north Idaho reported an increase in moderate to severe drought coverage.

Wildfire activity in February was limited to a few small wind-driven fires in north-central Montana with total new fire acreage for the month reaching 300 acres until a strong downslope wind event February 26 resulted in several new fires including the 5,060-acre Rehder Creek Fire south of Roundup. Unseasonably warm temperatures and snow-free ground facilitated broadcast burns in a few areas, which is uncommon in February but hampered normal pile burning. The weather pattern switch mid-month supported better windows for pile burning as snow created natural fuel breaks. As February ends, heavy dead and down fuels are beginning to show an increasing moisture content trend in most areas but remain well below normal in central and parts of western Montana.

This outlook period can generally be divided into March-April, which is historically the pre-green-up window, and May-June, which is the wettest part of the year in most of the NRGA. Current March outlooks show warm weather is likely to continue but a westerly flow pattern is favored which brings chances for shower activity this month. If enough moisture arrives in March, then it is likely the warm temperatures will initiate an earlier green-up and begin to decrease fire potential. This would support limited fire activity in May while June is rarely an active fire month. This scenario supports normal significant wildland fire potential for the March through June period.

Great Basin

Normal significant fire potential is expected throughout the Great Basin through May, but above normal potential is forecast for June in portions of southern Utah and the Arizona Strip. April and May are normally the wettest months for the northern half of the Great Basin as spring storms track through the region and vegetation begins to take up moisture during green-up. The typical increase in wildfire activity during the early spring dormant season, before green-up, could be exacerbated across low elevation areas in northern Nevada and southern Idaho in March and April where last year’s grass crop remains due to a lack of compaction from snow this winter.

The Great Basin has experienced well above normal temperatures since November. Central portions of the Great Basin have been considerably drier than normal so far this winter. After a very dry January in most areas, storms increased in February. This has brought some near normal precipitation to parts of the Sierra Front, central Nevada, eastern Utah, and central Idaho. Large areas of moderate to severe drought exist across much of the area with a few spots of extreme drought in central Utah. However, the western Great Basin is free of drought. Snowpack remains well below normal across much of Nevada and Utah. Only the mountains of central Idaho, western Wyoming, and portions of the Sierra Front show snowpack above 80%, but much of this is at the higher elevations. The snowpack has not extended down to middle elevations as it normally does most winters.

Heading into March, fuels conditions improved from the very dry January conditions and remain well below critical levels, keeping wildfire activity minimal, as is typical for the season.

Wetter, albeit warmer, conditions are likely over at least the northern half of the Great Basin through at least mid-March, which will keep fire potential low and continue prescribed burning opportunities. Warmer and drier conditions are likely by May and June, with April being more of a transition month with lower confidence. This warm and dry pattern could result in slightly more wildfire activity across the central and northern areas prior to green-up in late spring, but fires should generally remain on the smaller side. The lack of significant snowpack at mid to upper elevations could impact or limit prescribed fire activities over the coming months with possibly an earlier start to fire season than normal this summer. If the spring green-up is early and weak, large fire activity may increase earlier than normal in late May or June in the lower elevation areas of northern Nevada and southern Idaho where fine fuel loading will likely be above normal due to carryover and new growth. Due to weather uncertainty, all low elevation areas are forecast to experience normal significant fire potential through May. Above normal fire potential was added to higher elevations of southern Utah and the Arizona Strip in June due to low snowpack and expected warmer and drier conditions in May and June.

Southwest

Above normal fire potential is forecast across eastern New Mexico in March, followed by normal potential area-wide in April. Above normal significant fire potential is forecast across portions of southeast Arizona and southern New Mexico in May that will expand to most higher elevation areas in June.

Precipitation in February was below normal across the region, mostly 30-50% of normal, with portions of eastern New Mexico and southwest Arizona receiving less than 10% of normal precipitation. Temperatures in February were above normal across most of the region, which continued the pattern from earlier this winter. This continuation of the longer-term dryness and warmth is expected to result in expanding drought.

As of Late February, the U.S. Drought Monitor indicated widespread areas of moderate to severe drought across most areas west of the Divide, with pockets of extreme drought in western New Mexico. These drought conditions are expected to gradually worsen into the spring, with drier than normal conditions expected. In addition, the mountain snowpack is very low, mostly 20-45% of normal.

Fire activity remains low but has been elevated at times in eastern New Mexico during wind events. Pile burning is already winding down, but some areas, especially in heavier fuels, are prepping to begin large scale broadcast burns.

The Climate Prediction Center (CPC) and Predictive Services Outlooks are for generally drier than normal conditions to continue, especially for March and April. May and June are likely to be near-normal, but this is also climatologically the driest time of year in the Southwest, with most areas typically receiving very little precipitation. Likewise, the CPC and Predictive Services outlooks for March to June are giving very strong signals for prolonged above normal temperatures through the period, increasing the chances for an earlier start to the fire season in many areas.

Above normal significant fire potential continues in eastern New Mexico in March, where a dense fine fuel load exists, while much of the brush remains dormant. Green-up in April onwards should temper this threat. The focus then shifts to the higher terrain where snowpack is very low (25-

45% of normal). In addition, the severe and prolonged drought over the past two years has caused widespread tree mortality and stress in diverse forest types, from mid-elevation woodlands (4,500 feet) to higher elevation pine forests (9,000 feet). These issues point strongly to above normal significant fire potential across much of the higher terrain in May and June, especially across western New Mexico and eastern Arizona.

Rocky Mountain

February was largely similar to January and December, warm and lacking precipitation throughout much of the Rocky Mountain Area (RMA). Periods of stronger winds started to become more common, leading to increased potential for significant fires, which will continue into March across southeast Colorado and Kansas. The lack of precipitation has led to areas of worsening drought. Going into April and May, the area is expecting the temperatures to be warmer than normal, with precipitation still expected to be less than average. Significant fire potential will revert to normal areawide for April and May but is expected to increase to above normal for Colorado's West Slope in June.

Like January, the RMA experienced another month of well above normal temperatures in February. Much of the area was 5-10 degrees above the long-term average for the month, with some individual days exceeding 20 degrees above than the daily normal. This was a continuation of the pattern that the RMA has been experiencing throughout the winter months, with temperatures since December averaging 4-8 degrees above average over the three months. Precipitation was largely the same, with the drier than normal conditions continuing the trend since the start of winter. February was especially bad across much of South Dakota, which saw less than a tenth of an inch of precipitation, along with some pockets of very low precipitation just east of Colorado's northern Front Range around Denver and Fort Collins. Much of the remainder of the RMA was still below typical amounts of precipitation, with only parts of southeast Colorado and Kansas seeing more than normal amounts from a single mid-month storm system. Much of this moisture did not last long as hot, dry, and windy conditions in the second half of the month increased evaporation. All of this resulted in continuation and expansion of drought across much of the RMA, with much of Wyoming now in moderate drought on the U.S. Drought Monitor, and the area covered by severe to exceptional drought has doubled the last month.

Larger fuel classes are setting record minimum fuel moisture values. Low precipitation and the absence of snow cover leave dormant fuels available to burn. The combination of these factors results in elevated fire danger for this time of year. Above normal fuel loading has led to elevated fire activity in Kansas. Wind events continue to be the primary driver for fires in the area.

Fire activity in the RMA in February included large fires that arose on the eastern plains of Colorado and in Kansas. Two large fires in the panhandle of Oklahoma burned into southern Kansas, as well. Once the wind events driving these fires tapered off, they were quickly contained. Initial attack remained light but consistent in the Black Hills and elsewhere in southern South Dakota.

La Niña continues to weaken and is expected to end by April. While La Niña is weaking, forecast models, along with observations from similar years in the past, do not show a significant shift from warm and dry conditions going forward into March. Increased chances for periods of stronger winds also will likely continue into March across southeastern Colorado into Kansas, which is typical this time of year. Longer range forecasts through June do not show a significant shift in temperatures with continued above normal conditions likely across the RMA. Precipitation will likely continue to be below normal west of the Continental Divide for the forecast period.

Significant fire potential in March will continue to be above normal across southeast Colorado and Kansas. This is due to the increased potential for wind events while fuels remain dormant and fuel loading remains higher than typical. Across the rest of the RMA, large fire potential is expected to remain near normal through May. Given the expected drought conditions entering June as we start the more typical fire season, the West Slope of Colorado should be prepared for increased potential for significant fires.

Eastern Area

Normal significant fire potential is forecast for the Eastern Area through June. There are areas that are in long-term drought including portions of the Big Rivers, Great Lakes, Northeast, and Mid-Atlantic. These areas could have elevated potential during windy days that follow long, dry periods, but enough precipitation is likely to occur to keep potential near normal the next few months.

Precipitation was mostly less than 75% of normal for the Eastern Area during February, with portions of Iowa, Illinois, and northern New England receiving less than 20% of normal for the month. However, the Upper Great Lakes received above normal precipitation and the Mid-Atlantic coast into southern New England received near-normal precipitation, a result of the strong Nor'easter February 22-23. Snowpack persists across most of the Great Lakes, although portions of southern Minnesota, southern Wisconsin, and Michigan have seen the snow melt out. Extensive snow covers the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic coast at the end of the month due to the late month storm. Temperatures varied across the region, with the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic coast below normal due to repeated cold air outbreaks from Canada. However, temperatures near and west of the Mississippi River were above normal, with temperatures in much of Minnesota and Iowa averaging more than seven degrees above normal for February.

The U.S. Drought Monitor shows that drought persists across portions of the Eastern Area. Drought is observed in the eastern Mid-Atlantic, northern New England, northern Minnesota and Wisconsin, and along a broad line from southern Missouri into northwest Ohio. Drought has intensified in portions of the Mid-Mississippi Valley, southern New England, and Pennsylvania, but has otherwise changed little across most of the region. Small areas of extreme drought persist in eastern Illinois to northwest Ohio, with a small area in southern Missouri, and another small area in northern New Jersey.

Fire activity increased in February, primarily in Missouri, which had several large fires over the month. Strong winds amid low relative humidity resulted in the 200-acre Tomahawk Fire in Iowa February 18. Numerous small fires also occurred in West Virginia and southeast Ohio February 20 during a period of strong westerly winds amid very low relative humidity which was followed by light snowfall. Another period of elevated activity occurred in southern Missouri February 24 with strong southwest winds when three large fires emerged, including the Upton Road Fire east of Springfield which burned 550 acres.

Overall temperatures forecast by the Climate Prediction Center (CPC) are expected to be above normal for the southern tier, with no category favored for the Great Lakes and Northeast. Precipitation is likely to be above normal for March for the Great Lakes to the Mid-Mississippi and Ohio Valleys, with no favored category for April through June.

For the majority of the Eastern Area, this outlook period will deal with the emergence of spring. Fire potential will depend on the frequency of precipitation and wind events, in both speed and direction through May. The drought in southern Missouri and in the Mid-Atlantic is concerning, but a wet start to March is expected to mitigate the concern for most of the month. Southern Missouri is of most concern given the above normal activity observed the past two months, but the wet

period forecast to start March is likely to be centered here and mitigate the concern. As is typical, activity will spread north and east as spring commences. Areas of heavier fuels due to last year's derecho in northern Minnesota and the ice storm in northern Lower Michigan will be of particular concern in mid-spring.

Normal significant fire potential is forecast for the next four months as the Eastern Area heads into its spring fire season. As mentioned above, areas of long-term drought in southern Missouri and the Mid-Atlantic are of concern, but the wet start to the month and snow cover to begin March will keep potential normal most of the month. For April, green-up is likely to commence in Missouri and keep potential normal. The Mid-Atlantic will continue to be monitored for above normal potential for April into May where long-term drought persists, especially in the pine barrens, but confidence is too low currently to forecast elevated significant fire risk. In the Great Lakes, if drought were to emerge and intensify this spring, it could result in drier fine fuels during the peak of spring fire season and will be watched.

Southern Area

The Southern Area's spring fire season is well underway, as unusually widespread drought has been accompanied by several episodes of high-end fire weather. The overall theme of this update prevails, with widespread above normal significant fire potential in March followed by gradually improving conditions as green-up occurs. Fuel loading in the Plains will contribute to heightened risks there, even after wetter conditions temporarily set in, while January's ice storm, pine mortality, and hurricane fuels are all factors from the Mississippi Valley into the Southeast.

Conditions from late last fall into meteorological winter were unusually dry throughout the region. In fact, looking at the entirety of the Southern Area, it was the driest November to February period since at least the late 1970s, with only a handful of spots experiencing near or slightly above average precipitation. This dryness comes after the lowest impact hurricane season in more than a decade. Many areas that rely on beneficial tropical moisture with weather stations that have over 100 years of reliable data are experiencing a top five driest six-month period, according to an analysis from the Southeast Regional Climate Center. The scope of this hydrological drought may contribute to multiple portions of the region being in high fire danger simultaneously, from the Plains to the Appalachians and coastal regions. Otherwise, as unusually warm weather takes hold in March, green-up will get into full swing, increasing pressure on the water table and already depleted soil moisture. Areas that do not see sufficient soil moisture recharge could also have lingering issues well into the growing season.

Confidence is increasing that the typical La Niña storm track will finally set in during March, likely resulting in drought relief and no worse than normal significant fire potential from portions of the eastern Plains into the Mid-Mississippi Valley. This pattern also increases the potential for and frequency of high wind events across western Oklahoma and Texas, similar to the extreme weather that led to a Southern Great Plains Wildfire Outbreak on February 17.

Well-timed rainfall has maintained a moderated fire environment so far across the southern Appalachians and Piedmont, but as record warmth develops amid periods of dry weather in March, underlying drought and access issues associated with complex terrain and Hurricane Helene will come into play. Debris burning and abundant, increasingly available fuels will also enhance significant fire potential there. Similar issues associated with January's ice storm are another source of enhanced risk across far eastern Texas into northern Louisiana, western and northern Mississippi, western and middle Tennessee and southern Kentucky, in addition to smaller areas in northeast Georgia, the Carolinas and Virginia. Pine mortality is most concentrated from far eastern Texas into parts of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and far western Georgia. Widespread mortality in sub-tropical vegetation caused by recent multiple periods of

abnormally cold temperatures in central and southern Florida adds to the many other long-standing fuel issues that are too countless to list here.

Above normal significant fire potential has been extended into April across western Oklahoma and northwest Texas, where widespread above normal to locally exceptional fuel loads may dominate the fire environment into the climatological peak of their dormant season. Green-up will be key to reducing wildfire risks in the southern High Plains, and confidence is lower in sufficient rainfall there as compared to farther east. Meanwhile, the coastal Southeast is expected to have prolonged impacts from the fall and winter drought, even as potentially wetter conditions develop later in April or May. The scope of unusually low water levels and soil moisture now followed by abundant lightning through spring is a worrisome combination across Florida, Georgia, and northward along the Eastern Seaboard into the Carolinas, increasing the potential for an extraordinary spring fire season across the coastal Southeast.

Normal significant fire potential is expected regionally by June, but the potential for drought to carry through spring into summer across portions of the Plains, Gulf coastal plain, and Southeast will have to be monitored closely. Concerns for an active summer fire season may become concentrated in the pine-dominant areas of east Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi if El Niño rapidly sets in, similar to 2023, but confidence in this scenario is low for the time being.

Finally, most of the Caribbean has been atypically wet the past three months during what is normally the dry season. San Juan Airport for instance has observed its 10th wettest three-month period in the past 70 years, while rainfall across typically drier southern Puerto Rico is running 200-400% of normal for the same period. Abundant fuel growth notwithstanding, this moisture should at least temper the fire environment in the short term.

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