National Wildland Fire Outlook
National Interagency Fire Center
Predictive Services Group

Issued: April 12, 2006

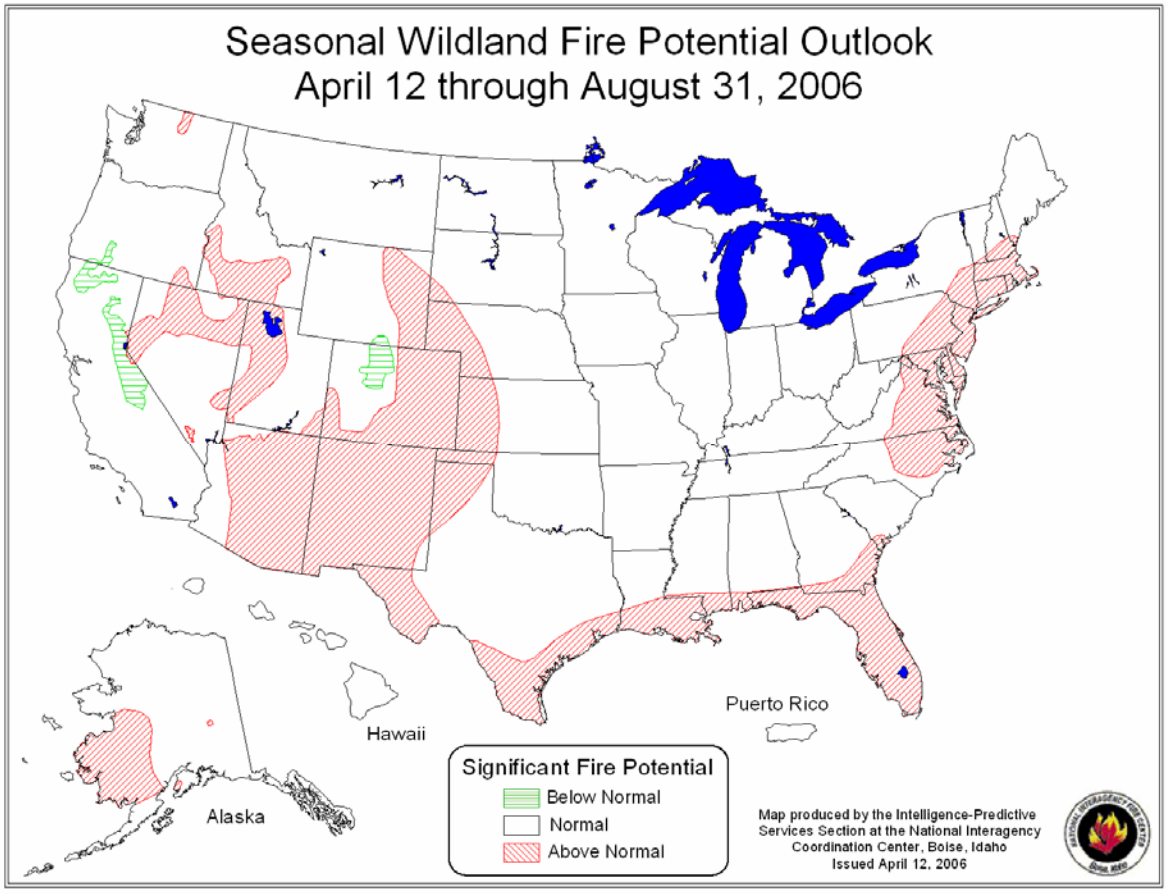
Wildland Fire Outlook – April through August, 2006

Fire potential is expected to be significantly higher than normal over portions of the West, Alaska, Great Plains, Gulf Coast and the East due to the following factors:

- Above average rain and snow in northern and central portions of the West will temper fire potential in the forests. Conversely, a dry winter in the Southwest and Alaska has increased the risk of wildfires this spring and summer. In addition, the Southwest and Great Basin have abundant carryover fine fuels from the wet 2004/2005 winter. This will elevate fire potential due to increased fuel loading and a continuous fuel bed for rapid fire spread. Long-term drought and associated bug-killed vegetation continue to elevate fire potential in portions of the West.

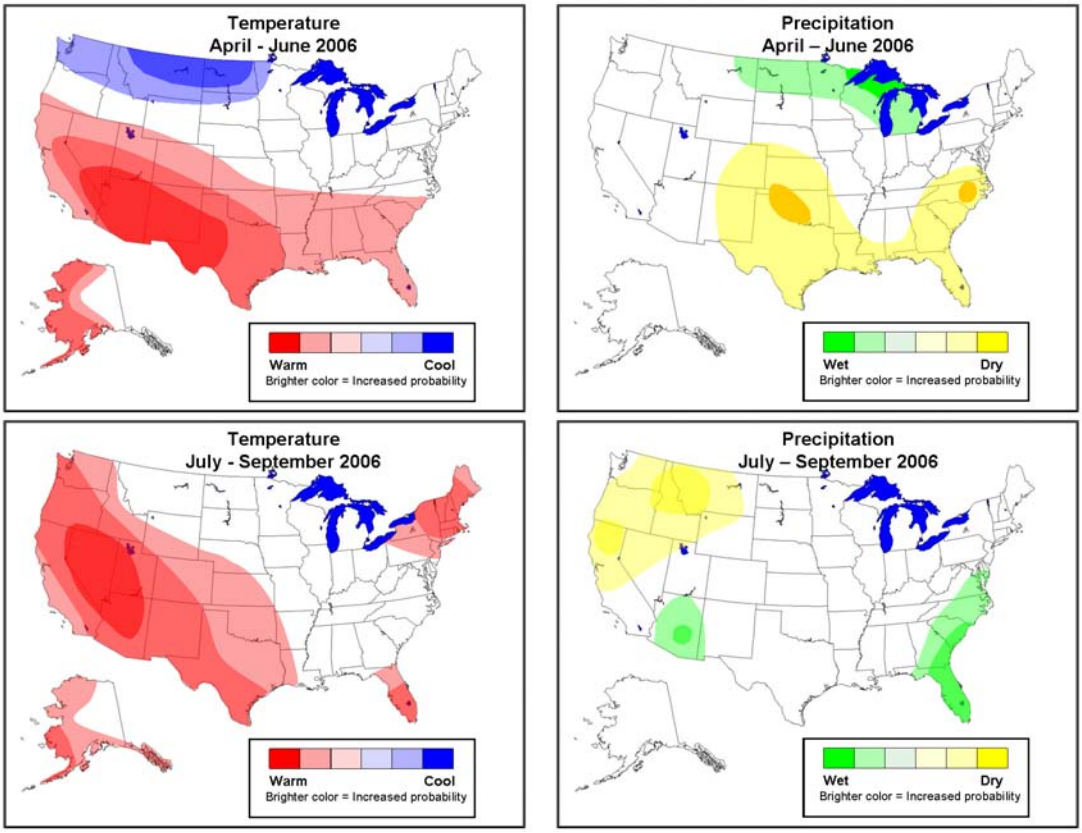
- Very dry conditions in the Southern Plains, Southeast and Eastern states will keep fire potential high until summer thunderstorms provide ample rainfall to diminish the fire threat.

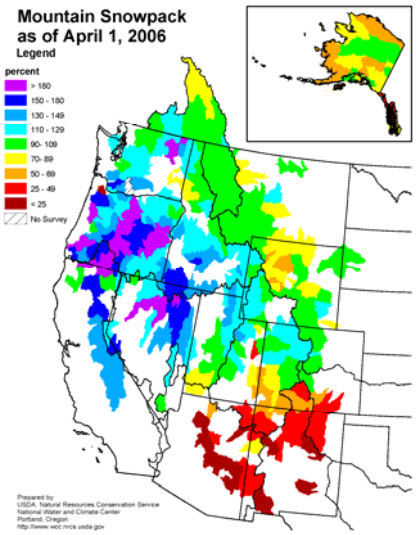
- Alaska is expected to have another above normal fire season with the main areas for concern in the Southwest, western Kenai Peninsula and around the Delta Junction area southeast of Fairbanks.

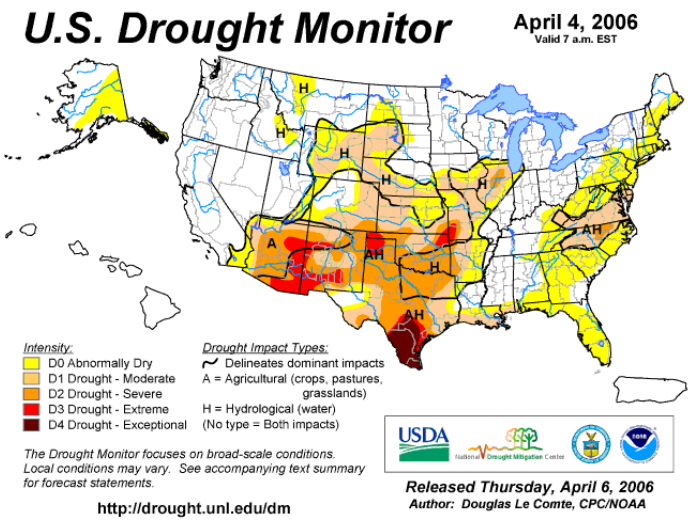


Weather

Near to above normal precipitation was received in March over the West and Central states while the Gulf Coast and the East were extremely dry. April 1st snowpacks were generally above normal in the Northwest and well below normal in the Southwest, which is the opposite of that seen in April 2005. The Climate Prediction Center outlooks (below) forecast a warmer and drier than normal summer in most of the West except with a stronger, and possibly earlier, than normal monsoon in the Southwest.







Area Discussions

Alaska: Potential: Normal to Above Normal. Snowpack for the past winter was normal to below normal with snowpack deficits being the worst in the northern and southwestern portions of the state. Forecasts for May through August call for above normal temperatures in western and southern Alaska. The combination of low snowpack and a warm summer is expected to create above normal fire potential in Southwest Alaska. However, conflicting climate signals for the summer have reduced confidence in the fire potential forecast for most areas. Higher confidence in above normal fire potential exists across the Kenai Peninsula where a significant area of hazardous fuels of bug killed spruce exists. The area around Delta Junction, which is southeast of Fairbanks, also has above normal fire potential this year due to low snowpack.

Southwest: Potential: Normal to Above Normal. The fire season will be characterized by a season of near normal onset and duration, but of unusual intensity and scope during May and June. There is high confidence that fire potential will be above normal across all elevations and fuel types over the majority of the Geographic Area. The potential for fires in the timber fuel types will be particularly high relative to normal. This is based on a current precipitation deficit over the past 6 months with many locations experiencing a record dry winter. The drought combined with carryover fuels from the wet winter of 2004/2005 will create an elevated risk with well below normal fuel moisture in existing live and dead fuels. Mid to high elevation heavier fuels are anticipated to support significant fire activity by May. Climate outlooks call for an extension of the current weak La Niña conditions which support a forecast of a dry spring, followed by a hot and dry May and June. In addition, some climate factors indicate the monsoon may be earlier and stronger than normal. Moisture is expected to increase east of the continental divide by late May into early June, with fire activity remaining significant through mid-July west of the Continental Divide.

Northern Rockies: Potential: Normal. The combination of normal to above normal snowpack and a cool spring will likely lead to a late start to the fire season. Winter and spring precipitation should help offset the effects of long-term drought in most of the Area. Below normal temperatures and near normal precipitation expected this spring should transition to a warmer and drier than usual summer. Abundant fine fuels from a wet winter along with significant areas of bug-killed timber will present areas of concern this summer. Overall, above average precipitation this winter balanced with drier than average conditions this summer will result in normal fire potential throughout the Area.

Great Basin: Potential: Below Normal to Above Normal. Long term drought combined with above normal fine fuel loading will result in above normal fire potential for lower elevation portions of the Great Basin. A small area along the California-Nevada border will have below normal fire potential due to an abundant, late winter snowpack. A heavy snowpack was also received this past winter across the mountains of central and northern Great Basin. This snowpack may last into early summer and thus decrease the chance of large timber fires this fire season. Abundant and continuous fine fuels are expected in elevations below 6500 feet due to a combination of abundant winter precipitation over north and central portions of the Area, carryover fuels from the 2004/2005 winter, and dry winter conditions across the south.

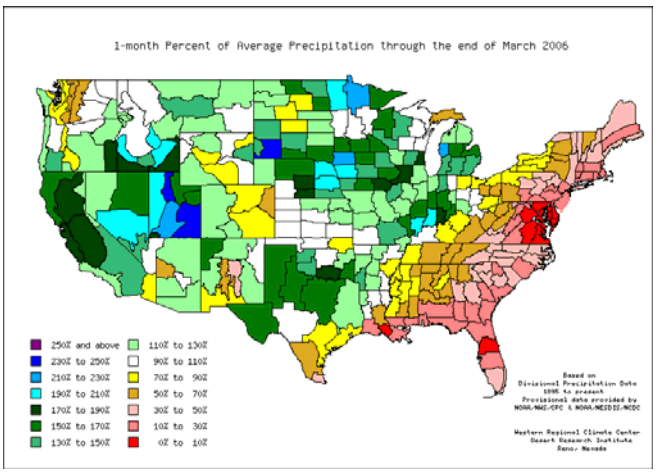
Northwest: Potential: Below Normal to Above Normal. The fire season will be normal for much of the Area due to abundant precipitation received this winter. The grasslands of southeast Oregon, where lightning storms from monsoon moisture could pose a problem, and portions of north-central Washington, where long term drought has persisted, are the only areas expected to have above normal fire potential. Plentiful winter precipitation and heavy snowpack will lead to a delayed start to the fire season with the southern Oregon Cascades having below normal fire potential. Long term

forecasts indicate warmer and drier than normal conditions by July and August, however the potential for a stronger than normal monsoon could result in increased thunderstorm activity mainly over southeast Oregon. Fuel moistures in spring are average or above average with no unusually strong drying trends expected before the start of the fire season.

Northern and Southern California: **Potential: Normal to Below Normal.** Below normal fire potential is expected over the central and northern Sierras and in portions of northwest California due to above normal precipitation and snowpack this winter and spring. Normal fire potential is forecast elsewhere across the state. Nearly all of California has been cooler and wetter than normal since mid-February. This has led to record late season snowpack. Through late April, a continued cool, wet pattern will add to the higher mountain snowpack, delay green-up, and result in a later than normal fire season onset, especially at higher elevations. Significant fire activity is not expected to begin until mid-August or later in the higher terrain areas across the northern half of the State. A later than normal onset to fire season could also occur in portions of Southern California due to late season precipitation. Lower elevation grass fires are likely after annual grasses cure, although the availability of brush fuels in the foothills may be delayed until live fuel moistures have time to drop to critical levels. There is a continuing concern for the large amount of bug-killed timber on National Forest lands over Southern California and the southern Sierra Nevada. Prescribed burning windows in northern California will likely start and end later than usual and could be impacted by potential resource commitments to incidents in other regions.

Rocky Mountain: **Potential: Below Normal to Above Normal.** Above normal fire potential is expected for southwest Colorado and an area that extends from southern Colorado northward towards northeast Wyoming. Above normal fire potential also extends into western Kansas and Nebraska, however green-up and increasing humidity over the Plains should diminish fire concerns later this spring. Drought conditions have significantly improved across much of Wyoming and the Black Hills during the last year, but have worsened across southern and eastern Colorado, Kansas and portions of Nebraska. Below normal fire potential is forecast for the northern Colorado Rockies, which has received above average snowpack. Fire potential elsewhere should be near normal. Frequent wind events have been typical this winter and are expected to continue through the spring, especially east of the divide. Wind driven grass fire activity will likely continue east of the Divide and across the Plains before green-up and higher humidity diminish the threat. Some climate indicators point to a hot/dry spring and summer for portions of the Area. Climate factors also suggest an early onset of the Southwest Monsoon, however the position and northern extent of the monsoon moisture is unknown.

Eastern Area: **Potential: Normal to Above Normal.** Fire potential will be above normal in the Mid-Atlantic States through early June from Virginia to southeastern Vermont, due to very dry conditions over the past few months. During March, the entire eastern seaboard received less than 50% of average precipitation. Large diameter fuel moistures have been well below average and fire danger indices have been at or near record levels in some areas within these mid-Atlantic and southeast New England States. The remainder of the Area is expected to have normal fire potential for the period.



<u>Southern Area:</u> Potential: Normal to Above Normal. The Southern Area has seen a very active wildland fire season with approximately five times the average number of acres as of March 31, 2006. Above normal fire potential will continue in portions of North Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, Florida, and a band along the Gulf Coast extending into southern Texas. Elsewhere, fire potential is expected to be normal. Fire potential is expected to return to normal in North Carolina and Virginia after May; however Florida is likely to experience a very active fire season into early summer. Hurricane damaged timber continues to be problematic along the Gulf Coast and in portions of Florida. Persistent drought conditions will cause elevated fire potential in portions of Oklahoma and Texas throughout the season. Increasing rainfall and continuing green-up this spring will help mitigate existing elevated fire danger in the Ohio and Tennessee Valleys. Another very active Atlantic basin hurricane season in 2006 is expected, however it is not anticipated to be as severe as 2004 or 2005.

Note: This national outlook and some Geographic Area assessments are currently available at the NICC and GACC websites. The GACC websites can also be accessed though the NICC webpage at: www.nifc.gov/news/pred_services/Main_page.htm