Fire Environment Statement

Early Onset of Elevated Fire Potential on DOI Lands in The West

May 15, 2026

Discussion: Early/elevated fire environment conditions occurring across many Department of Interior lands in the western U.S. (Lower 48) could challenge suppression efforts and warrant extra considerations for prescribed burning. Many areas are experiencing persisting and worsening drought, contributing to very dry dead woody fuels and flammable ground fuels. Erratic temperature and precipitation patterns have disrupted green-up and affected growth in some live fuels. Current fire danger, wildfire occurrence, and observed fire behavior are more like those seen during core fire season months. Field-level units are reporting fire environment indicators that are several weeks "ahead of schedule."

Difference from Normal Conditions:

- Snow drought: Nearly all western watershed basins reported record low snowpack, with winter precipitation falling as rain at lower and mid-elevation sites. Warm temperatures melted snow much earlier than normal.
- Drought extent & timing: Over 76% of CONUS is Abnormally Dry or worse (including nearly all of the West), with the footprint of Extreme and Exceptional Drought tripling in size over the past six weeks. Only once before (2002 – a significant wildfire year) has there been this much drought (footprint) in spring and trending worse.
- Thirsty atmosphere: Multiple measures (including VPD, SPEI, EDDI) over the past several months show an anomalously dry atmosphere, hastening drying of soils and stressing live vegetation.
- Erratic temperature and precipitation events: Amid persistent warming trends, most of the western states recorded their warmest March on record, resulting in an early start to the growing season. Despite the snow drought, timely and abundant pulses of springtime precipitation further supported robust growth in this year's grass crop and other herbaceous fuels. Conversely, short periods of freezing temperatures repeatedly disrupted green-up in some areas, and late-season snow may have damaged trees and shrubs that leafed-out early.
- Fire danger and fuel moisture: Due to the fundamental dryness and warming temperatures, longer-term NFDRS metrics, including ERC, 1000-hr fuel moisture, & KBDI, for many sites are more typical of the values seen during peak fire season months. Indices are reverting to high levels quickly after periods of favorable weather. Field sampling suggests some live fuels have prematurely gone dormant, likely due to heat and moisture stress.
- Increased burn mortality: Dry duff and heavy dead woody fuels are contributing to increased fire intensity and longer residence time, which can increase mortality due to heat impacts on roots and canopy vegetation.
- Unreliable rules of thumb: Dry conditions and related factors can change critical thresholds for winds (lower than normal) and RH (higher than normal) when dangerous fire behavior arises. Burn periods may be lengthened, with aggressive burning beginning early in the day or lasting into nighttime hours. Green fuels may not hold.

Concerns for Wildfire Suppression and Prescribed Fire Operations:

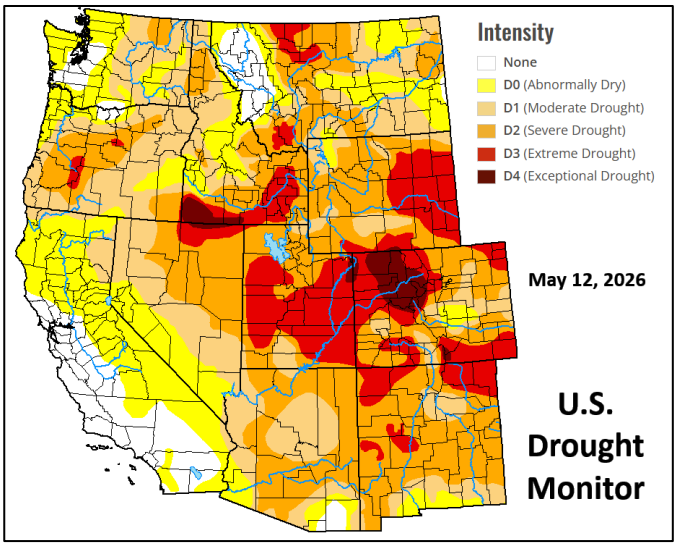
- Increased wildfire activity, earlier in the season: More numerous, more intense, and larger wildfires, including areas of heavier fuels and at higher elevations.
- Less desirable prescribed fire outcomes: Threat of escape or rekindle; fewer beneficial/more negative effects.
- Early season wildfire readiness/response commitments: Longer duration wildfires (more mop-up/patrol); fewer local resources available to support prescribed burning; concurrent activity in multiple regions limiting resource assignments to/from other partners and areas.

Mitigation Measures:

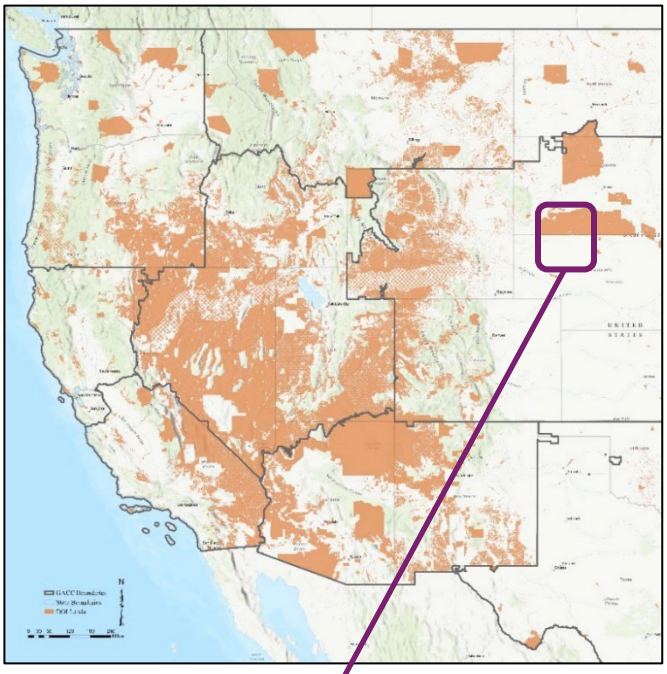
- Ensure active leadership engagement within the USWFS and partner land management agencies to assess and address concerns/needs across programs and units.
- Reevaluate burn prescription parameters through the lens of persistent drought conditions and longer-term NFDRS indicators (e.g. ERC, 1000-hr fuel moisture, KBDI). Anticipate negative fire effects on already-stressed vegetation. Expect rapidly rebounding indices after periods of favorable weather.
- Review long-term weather forecasts and fire growth projections to identify staffing needs for holding, mop-up, and patrol, given the anticipated prolonged heat retention in large fuels and high potential for rekindles.
- Consider additional planning and assessment needs, including Long-Term Analyst (LTAN) support. Clearly document all decisions related to ignition authorization, including go/no-go determinations.
- Monitor similar advisories issued for other/smaller areas, including the Fire Environment Statement for Southwest (tree mortality) and Fuels & Fire Behavior Advisory for Southern Area (widespread dry conditions).

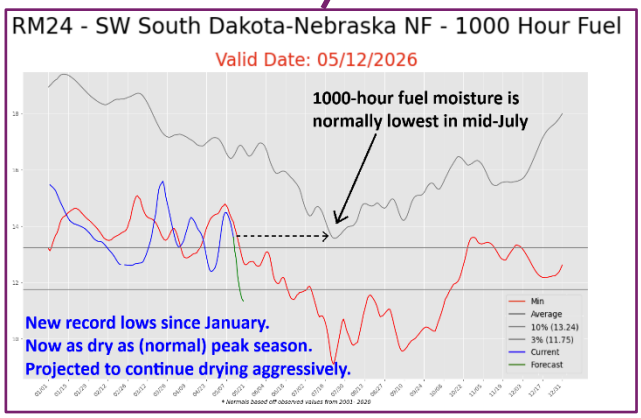
Issued By: U.S. Department of Interior – Wildland Fire Service – Headquarters Office – Pre & Post-Wildfire Mitigation & Education and Intelligence/Analytics/Science Divisions

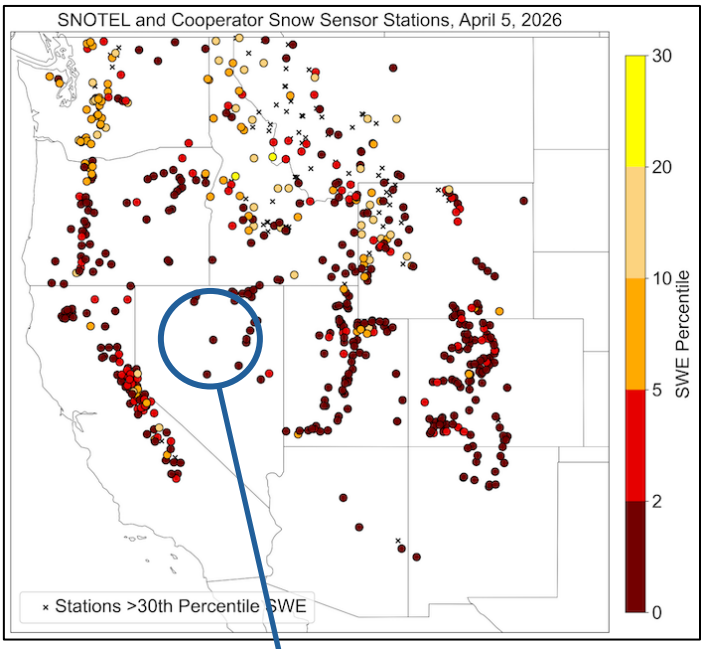
Area of Concern: Department of Interior lands in the western U.S. (Lower 48), with similar conditions potentially affecting other partner agencies and their adjacent lands.



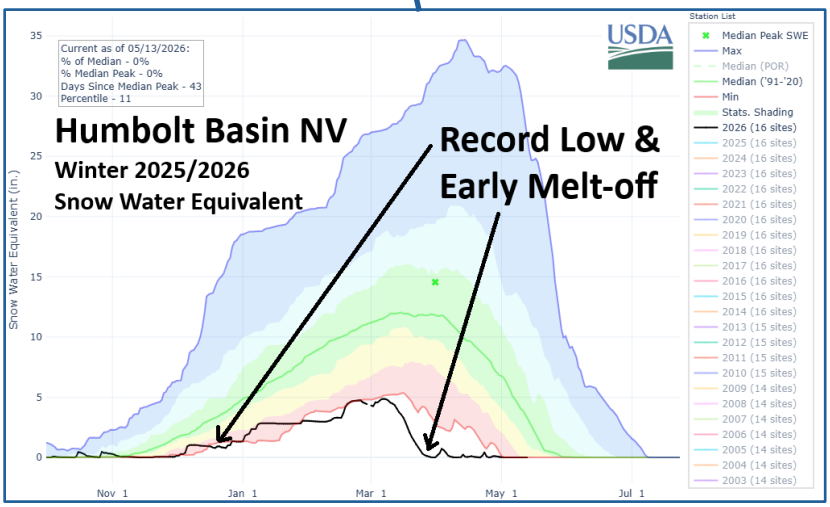
https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/







Drought Monitor (upper right) shows much of the West in drought, with no improvement expected over the summer. Snow water equivalent (SWE) readings for most basins and sites in early April (middle right) were below the 30th percentile, and many at/near record lows. Humbolt Basin NV (lower right) is a typical example, where SWE set new record lows since February, and snowpack melted by April, a full month earlier than the prior worst years. In SD & NE (above), 1000-hr fuels are already as dry as normally seen in mid-July, when fire danger typically peaks. Other sites in the West have similarly dry fuels.



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