National Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook

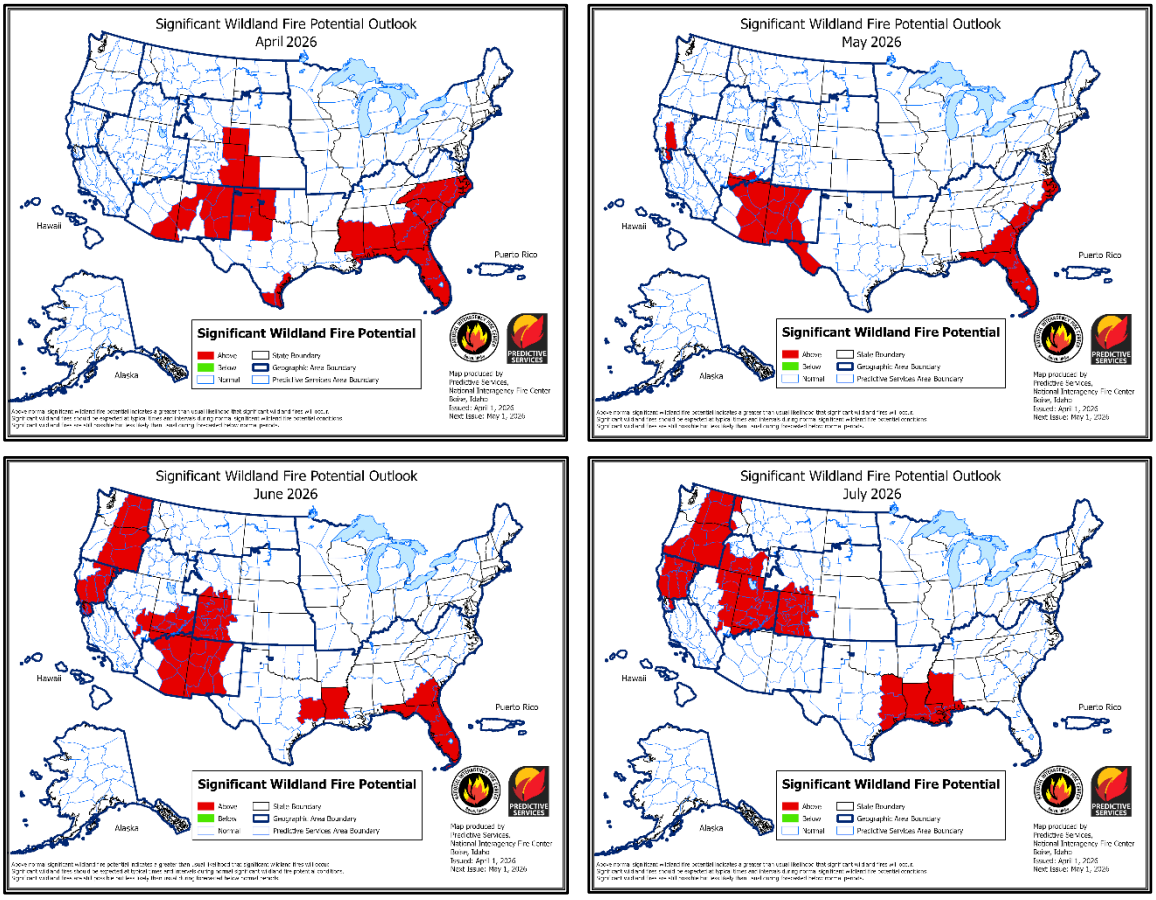
Predictive Services
National Interagency Fire Center

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

Outlook Period – April through July 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 increased across the U.S. in March, especially on the latter half of the month. Notable increases in activity were observed in the Southern and Rocky Mountain Geographic Areas, with other, more modest, increases in the Southwest, California, Great Basin, Northern Rockies, and Eastern Areas. Due to the observed increase in activity, the National Preparedness Level increased to two (on a scale of 1-5) March 20, with the Southern Area at a geographic area Preparedness Level of three. As of March 31, 1,615,683 acres have burned across the country, which is 231% of the previous 10-year average. So far this year 16,746 wildfires have been reported, also well above average, at 168%.

March precipitation was below normal across most of the U.S., with well below normal precipitation observed across California, the Southwest, Great Basin, and southern High Plains, with many areas receiving less than 25% of normal precipitation. Above normal precipitation occurred in most of Washington and the northern Rockies, as well as the Great Lakes southward

into the Ohio Valley. Localized areas of above normal precipitation also occurred in South Florida. Overall drought increased across the country due to the dry conditions with over 56% of the U.S. now in drought. Drought persisted, intensified, or developed in much of the western U.S. into the central and southern Plains, and Lower Mississippi Valley. Drought improvement was limited to smaller areas, primarily in the Mid-Mississippi Valley, Great Lakes, and Northeast.

Climate Prediction Center and Predictive Services outlooks issued in late March forecast temperatures that are likely to be above normal across most of the U.S. in April, focused on the Great Basin and Southwest. Precipitation is likely to be below normal in most of the West, and Florida, with above normal precipitation expected in the Mississippi Valley to the Great Lakes and Mid-Atlantic. For the following three months from May to July, temperatures are likely to be above normal for most of the U.S. except the northern half of Alaska and the Upper Midwest. Temperatures are most likely to be above normal in the Great Basin to the southern Plains. Precipitation is likely to be below normal across the northern half of the West to the central Plains, with above normal precipitation likely in southern Arizona and New Mexico, as well as most of the East and Gulf Coasts.

Above normal significant fire potential is forecast for April across much of the central and southern High Plains into most of New Mexico and southeast Arizona. Above normal potential is also forecast across South Texas and much of the Southeast. In May, normal potential will return to the Plains and most of the Southeast, but above normal will persist for the southeast Atlantic coast and Florida. Above normal significant fire potential will also expand across the Southwest into far West Texas and extreme southern Utah, with another area of above normal potential forecast for the Sacramento Valley and East Bay. In June, above normal potential will continue in much of the Southwest, while also expected into much of southern Nevada, southern Utah, and the Colorado West Slope. Above normal potential will also expand across much of northern California and the Inland Northwest. In the Southeast, above normal potential is forecast to persist for South Georgia and Florida, while also expected for portions of East Texas and Louisiana. In July, normal significant fire potential will return to South Georgia and Florida as the wet season emerges, but above normal potential is expected to expand across all East Texas and much of the Lower Mississippi Valley. In the West, the Southwest will return to normal due to the onset of the monsoon, but above normal potential will cover a larger area overall, including all of Utah, much of eastern Nevada, much of central and western Colorado, southern Idaho, northern California, the Inland Northwest, and portions of southwest Oregon and the Idaho Panhandle.

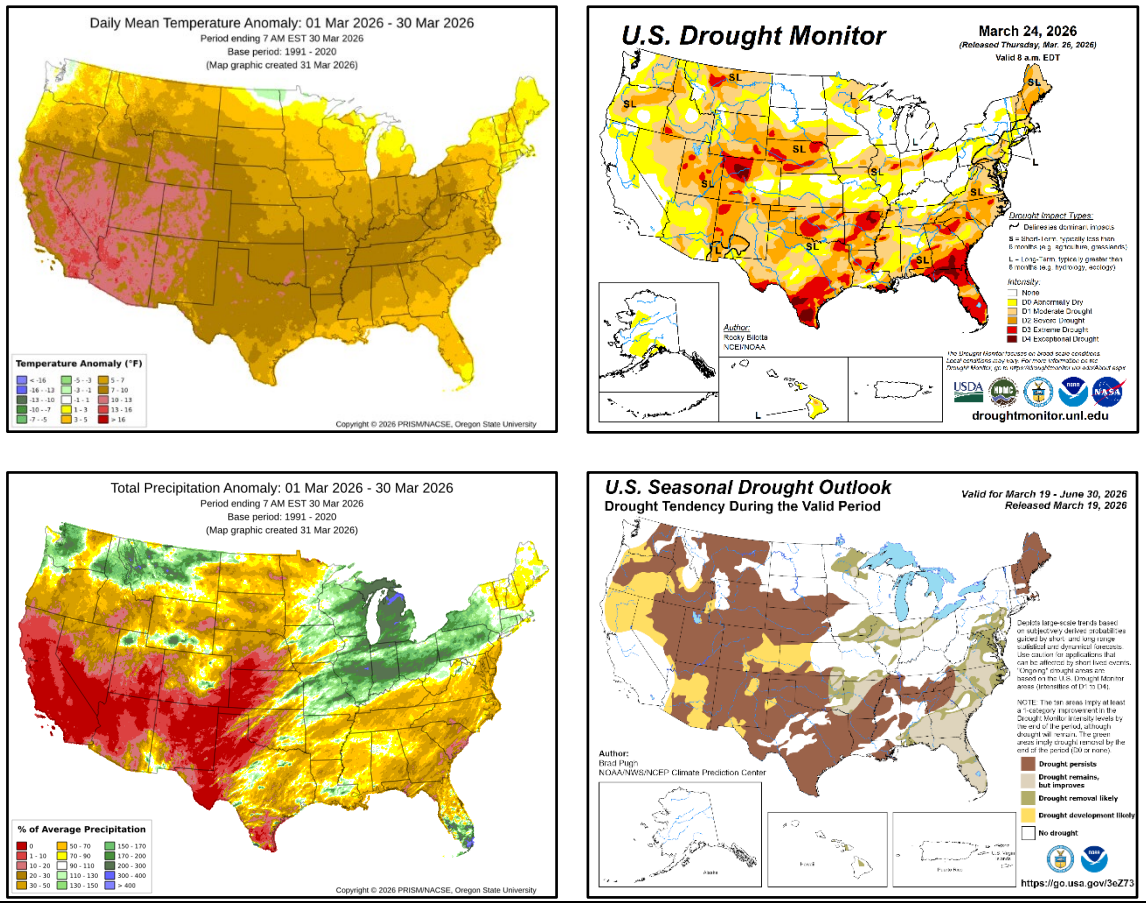
Past Weather and Drought

Temperatures in March were above normal for much of the country, with temperatures well above normal for most of the West into the Plains, Lower Mississippi, Ohio, and Tennessee Valleys. Temperatures averaged more than 10°F above normal in much of California into the central Rockies and Southwest, while the southern Plains to the Ohio and Tennessee Valleys averaged 7-10°F above normal. More modestly above normal temperatures were observed in the Northwest, Upper Midwest, Northeast, and Florida, while well below normal temperatures continued in Alaska.

Temperatures across California into the Great Basin, Southwest, and southern Plains were dominated by an unprecedented early season heat wave March 15-25. Many locations not only set record high temperatures for March during this heat wave, but a few would have been record-high values for April, as well. For example, Albuquerque recorded its earliest ever 90°F reading March 21, more than six weeks earlier than its previous earliest 90°F temperature set May 3, 1947. As a result of this heat wave, most locations have their all-time warmest March on record, in many cases exceeding the previous record by up to 6°F, where these values would have been in the top-ten warmest Aprils if they occurred a month later. In fact, Las Vegas, Nevada’s March average temperature of 73.1°F would have exceeded the warmest ever April on record of 72.7°F set in 1989.

In addition to the warmth across the U.S., precipitation was below normal across most of the U.S. for March. Precipitation less than 25% of normal was observed across large areas of California, the Great Basin, Southwest, and central and southern High Plains. Below normal precipitation, but not as extreme and generally 25-75% of normal was observed across much of Texas, the Lower Mississippi Valley, and Southeast, as well as Oregon and the northern Plains. Areas of above normal precipitation were limited to western Washington, the Idaho Panhandle, much of Montana, and the Great Lakes south to the Ohio River. A small area of above normal precipitation was also observed in South Florida. Precipitation in Alaska was mostly well below normal, except for portions of the panhandle which were closer to normal. Hawai'i precipitation was well above normal for most areas due to two strong Kona Lows in mid-March.

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 25% of normal. Much of this was due to the heat wave which triggered a much earlier melt-off than normal, during a period of the year when the peak snowpack is observed in most locations. In fact, several river basins in the Southwest and Great Basin have no snow at any of their monitoring stations, such as the Humboldt Basin in Nevada, and the Lower San Juan Basin in the Four Corners. The melt-off in these basins is not just several weeks or months earlier than normal, but also 4-6 weeks earlier than the previously recorded earliest melt-off dates.



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)***.

Wildfire activity increased across the U.S., especially in mid to late March. In addition to the well above normal temperatures contributing to activity, wind events also contributed to the increase in activity across the Rockies, Plains, and Southeast. An exceptional wind event from the Rockies, east of the Divide, to the Plains occurred March 12. West sustained winds 30-65 mph, with gusts

as high as 90 mph, were observed amid minimum relative humidity of 5-20% resulting in an historic wildfire outbreak in Nebraska and other large fires arising in the Black Hills, Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. One of these fires, the Morrill Fire in the Nebraska Panhandle burned over 600,000 acres in 48 hours, with most of the area burned in the first 10 hours. In addition, on the back side of the heat wave an unusual early season dry lightning event resulted in two new large fires in the Nebraska Panhandle March 26.

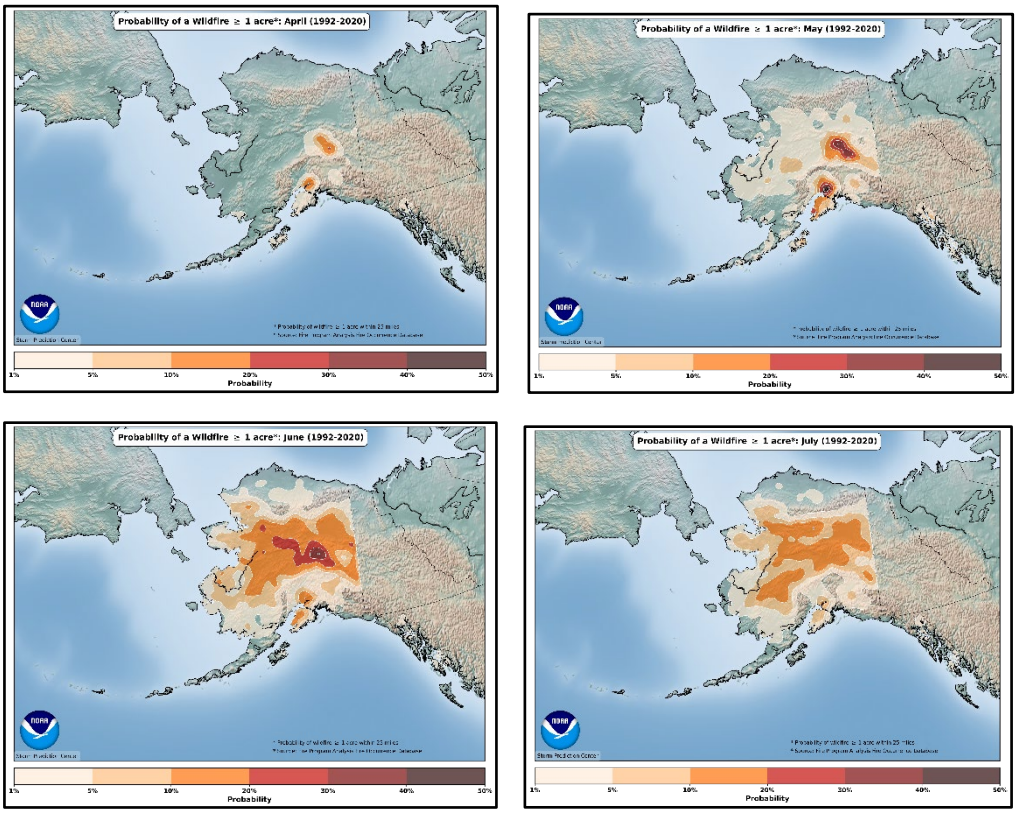
Overall drought increased across the U.S. during March with more than 56% of the country in drought as of March 24. Drought developed and/or intensified in much of the West, with the greatest increase in drought observed in Oregon, the northern Great Basin, Arizona, and Colorado. Drought also developed and intensified in much of the Plains focused on Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska, as well as the Lower Mississippi Valley and portions of Florida. Drought improved in much of the Mid-Mississippi Valley, with a significant improvement to removal in Illinois, while smaller improvements in drought were observed in the Great Lakes and Northeast. Areas of extreme drought have expanded across the U.S. and is now found across more than 8% of the country. The most extensive extreme drought is in South Texas, Florida, South Georgia, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and northwest Colorado. Exceptional drought has also expanded and now exists in western Colorado, South Texas, northern Arkansas, South Georgia, and Florida. However, drought has improved in much of Hawai'i due to the very wet month. It is important to note that the many areas of snow drought in the West are not yet reflected in the U.S. Drought Monitor.

Drought is expected to persist through June where it exists across much of the Rockies and Northwest into the High Plains and central Plains. Drought is expected to expand across much of the Rockies where it does yet exist and into much of Oregon, Arizona, and northern California, which is reflective of the snow drought mentioned earlier. However, drought is expected to improve across the Midwest, Mid-Atlantic, eastern Oklahoma, central and East Texas, and Arkansas. Drought is expected to persist across the southeast Atlantic coast and Florida for much of April and May before beginning to improve in June.

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, as abundant warming continues below the surface. The Climate Prediction Center forecasts La Niña to transition to ENSO-neutral conditions in the next few weeks, with ENSO-neutral conditions expected to persist through spring. El Niño conditions are expected to develop over the summer, but the strength of the El Niño is yet to be determined due to the spring predictability barrier. The Pacific Decadal Oscillation (PDO) remains in a weak negative phase and has less impact on this forecast than prior years. The Madden-Julian Oscillation (MJO) is weak but is forecast to strengthen in the western Pacific in early April before moving into the western hemisphere later in the month. The impact from this active phase of the MJO for April is uncertain for most of the country except for the Southeast, which is more likely to be warmer than normal with the MJO in this position. Despite this impact from the MJO in April, the transition from La Niña to ENSO-neutral conditions followed by El Niño 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. The landscape will become snow-free at normal times throughout April and May, with small, human-caused fire activity increasing through this period and peaking in late June.

This winter has seen very deep snowpack for parts of the Interior, and near to slightly below normal amounts elsewhere. 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 has elevated some areas to abnormally dry 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 April indicate the likelihood of near normal conditions for most of the state. For May and beyond, the western third of the state may lean toward warmer and wetter than normal while the eastern Interior may lean toward cooler than normal. Elsewhere, equal chances for above and below normal precipitation exist. Overall, this indicates that the snowpack will stick around until late spring for most areas, leading to a predominantly normal start to fire season.

El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) conditions are forecast to shift from a weak La Niña this winter to neutral conditions this spring and El Niño over the summer months. While the likelihood of a large fire season in Alaska increases during a strong El Niño, the majority of seasons have

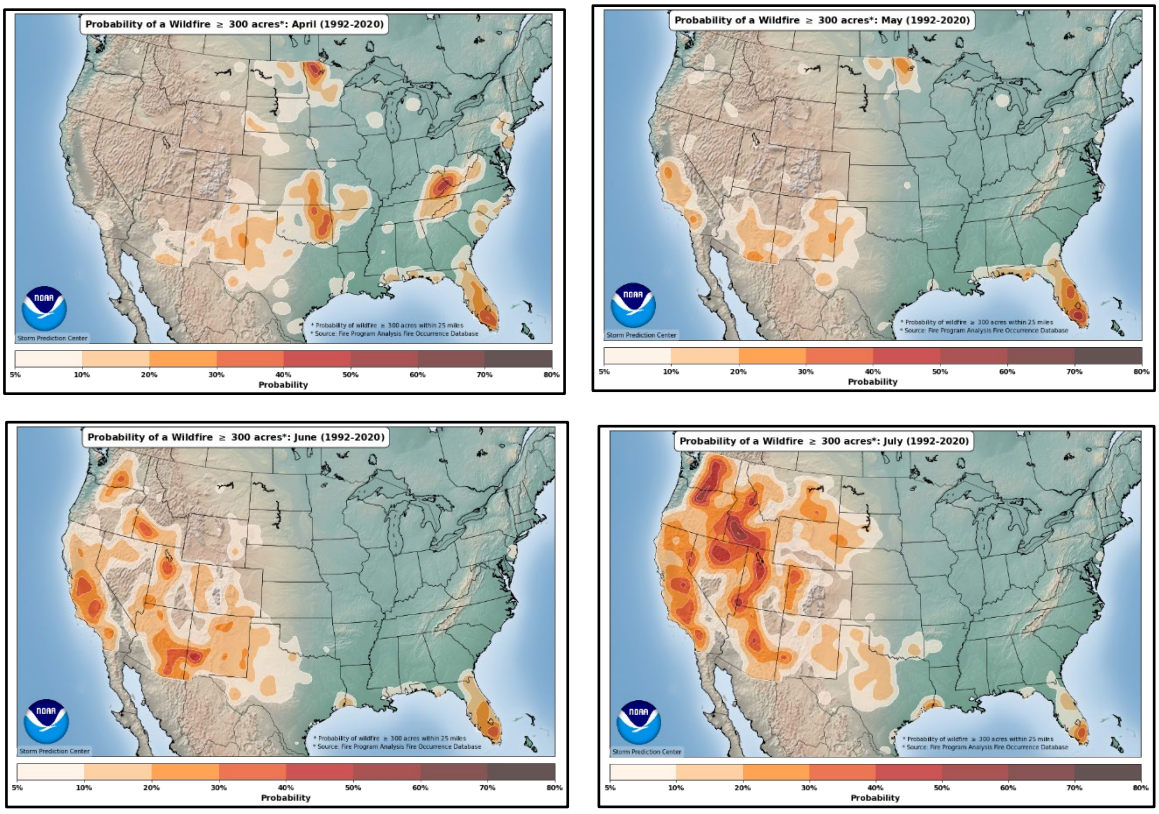
not escalated significantly. Moreover, El Niño is not forecast to become strong until late in the Alaska fire season, which could further limit any potential impacts of the ENSO transition.

Spring temperatures and precipitation have an impact on snowmelt timing, which determines when fire season begins in Alaska. 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.

Amid windy conditions, three wildfires arose in March along the population corridor, but all were contained before growing large. Nonetheless, this is a reminder that as snow melts, especially along roadways, small wind-driven fires will become more common.

Fuels remain snow-covered across the state. Fire weather indices will be turned on as areas become snow-free which usually occurs throughout the month of April. This typically occurs first in low elevations of the southern portion of the state before progressing upwards in elevation and farther northward.

As areas become snow-free throughout April, expect an increase in small human-caused fires especially along the road system. Moving into May, higher elevations and areas farther north will become snow-free with a gradual uptick in mid to late May, moving to the busy heart of fire season at the end of June. 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. This describes normal fire conditions for Alaska. Accordingly, significant fire potential, while increasing seasonally, is expected to be normal for all parts of Alaska for this April through July outlook period.



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

A shift toward El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO)-neutral this spring, paired with the Climate Prediction Center (CPC) warm tilt and lack of a reliable wet signal, supports continued drying of mid- and lower-elevation fuels as snow levels remain higher than average. For April and May, potential stays seasonally low and normal with short, localized windows. Confidence increases that June through July will bring the first broad step-up in significant fire potential, consistent with historical indications.

March brought a noticeable shift from the warm and dry pattern that dominated February. Several atmospheric river events reached the Northwest and produced above-average precipitation across parts of western Oregon and Washington. These storms reduced short-term dryness but kept snow levels unusually high with most new accumulation occurring above roughly 5,000 feet. Mid-elevation snow water equivalent (SWE) therefore remained well below normal despite the increase in precipitation.

Temperatures stayed warmer than average through most of the month. Anomalies were 4 to 10°F above normal across Oregon and Washington with only small cooler pockets near the northwest Washington coast. Precipitation patterns were mixed. Portions of western Washington received more than 200% of normal precipitation. Elsewhere, precipitation amounts were much lower, with many interior areas finishing March below 50% of normal. These conditions limited mid-elevation SWE recovery and continued to favor melt over accumulation.

Drought classifications changed little from late February to late March. Portions of eastern Washington, northeast Oregon, and southwest Oregon remain in moderate to severe drought. These areas will need sustained spring moisture or several colder, snow-producing events to materially improve soil moisture and streamflow. Most remaining areas are listed as abnormally dry or carry no drought designation, though continued warmth and limited mid-elevation SWE suggest drought could expand if spring storms underperform.

Fire activity through March remained seasonally low. Starts were primarily small, human-caused ignitions. They were quickly held with only brief spread where dry pockets and wind alignment allowed short runs. A few incidents in northeast Washington, northeast Oregon, central Oregon, and southwest Oregon reached 10 to 50 acres. These align with early-season pre-green up fuel dryness and match expectations given the warm lead-up.

Energy Release Component (ERC) values climbed through mid-March during warm and dry periods, then held steady or eased somewhat with late-month precipitation. 100-hour and 1000-hour fuel moisture remains lowest across central and southern interior Predictive Services Areas (PSAs), where exposure and warm weather support faster drying. West-side fuels currently retain more moisture, though interior fine fuels are showing quicker response to short dry periods. Heavy fuels remain unavailable for now, but warming and limited mid-elevation snow will support more rapid drying as April continues.

The CPC expects a transition from La Niña to ENSO-neutral in April, with ENSO-neutral conditions favored May to July. CPC outlooks show a persistent warm tilt and no strong wet signal for the Northwest through this period. In combination with higher snow levels and low SWE, these conditions support steady drying through spring into early summer. With no indication of a cooler or wetter shift, fuels will become available to burn earlier than usual. Historical analog years with similar ENSO (2015, 2018) and SWE conditions (2005, 2015) show a marked increase in fire activity beginning in June and a clear peak in July.

Temperatures are expected to run warmer than normal from April through July. Warmer spells will accelerate drying of low- and mid-elevation fuels and reduce the snowpack contribution to spring moisture. Even though ENSO-neutral reduces long-range predictability, there is no signal

suggesting a cooler pattern. Temperature remains a primary factor pushing fuels toward critical levels approaching June and July.

Current CPC precipitation guidance shows no reliable wet signal for the Northwest during this period. Equal chances conditions indicate limited predictive skill, not near-normal moisture. With persistent warmth and higher snow levels, drying will continue unless interrupted by meaningful storm systems. Under this pattern, interior fuels typically cure earlier, making June and July increasingly critical for the potential of significant fires.

Significant fire potential is expected to remain normal across all PSAs during April and May as seasonal green-up develops. Areas east of the Cascades are expected to have a shorter than typical green-up period due to warm conditions and limited SWE. By June, lack of a prolonged wet period will bring significant fire potential above normal across all areas east of the Cascade Crest (PSAs NW05-NW12) as fuels cure more quickly, but Westside PSAs (NW01-NW04) will remain normal. July brings the highest potential of the period, with above-normal designations expanding to include southwest Oregon (NW04) while other Westside areas (NW01-NW03) remain normal.

Northern California and Hawai'i

For northern California, significant fire potential is projected to be normal for April and above normal for portions of the lowlands in May. The above normal area expands during June and July. Historically, northern California averages a total of one to two significant fires during April and May. During June a total of 12 significant fires is typically observed while 16 occur during July. Hawaii's significant fire potential is expected to remain normal for April through July.

March was unusually warm and dry due to extended atmospheric blocking periods that led to strong upper-level ridging across much of the West. The most impactful precipitation events in northern California occurred during the beginning and end of the month. Precipitation anomalies were generally below to well below normal. A historic spring heat wave occurred during the latter half of the month. Record high temperatures were broken each day between March 15-29 except for March 26 across some portion of northern California. Several locations broke their all-time March high temperatures, with many also recording their warmest March since records began. Average temperatures were generally above to well above normal although a few areas of near normal were found across portions of the north coast. A little over 80 lightning strikes were observed through March 29 using the Vaisala detection system, although some lightning is in the forecast March 30 and 31. The 2000-2025 Vaisala average is 676 strikes for March. There were four dry northerly and easterly wind periods with the strongest March 26. There were three gusty westerly wind events with low to marginally low humidity readings. No National Weather Service Red Flag Warning or Predictive Service High Risks were issued in March for northern California.

The unusually warm and dry conditions during March led to increased dead fuel flammability as the month progressed. The regional Energy Release Component (ERC) value exceeded the record maximum on March 16 and the 60th percentile on March 17. The Bay-Marine Predictive Services Area (PSA) ERC value was above the 90th percentile for several days due to the lack of a marine layer. The unusually warm temperatures resulted in an expansion of the early green-up that started in February. Shrub leaf out was observed as high as 5,000 feet in elevation by the end of the month. Dormancy was generally relegated to the higher elevations. Herbaceous green-up also expanded with visible growth as high as 6,000-7,000 feet. Early curing was visible during the latter half of the month across the lowest elevations where either thin soil or direct sun was located. Despite the minimal curing herbaceous fuels served as a fire spread inhibitor across the low elevations. The March heat decimated the snowpack with patchy snow cover generally found above 5,800-6,800 feet by the end of the month. Most of the exposed higher elevations became devoid of snow as the month progressed. The amount of

moisture found within the snowpack decreased from 45-65% normal on January 31 to 5-20% normal March 30. The heat wave alone melted most of the snowpack, representing 25-30% of the normal total snow water equivalent. No drought conditions existed during March based on the U.S. Drought Monitor, although abnormally dry areas grew noticeably across the north and east. The two-month Evaporative Demand Drought Index (EDDI) value on March 25 showed notable dryness markers across the near coastal areas and mountains.

Wildfire business grew during March with increased initial attack and spread after ignition. Several ignitions were due to escaped debris burns on private land. The daily wildfire ignition average through March 29th was 4.4 and much higher compared to the February average of 0.8. This month's activity is also nearly double the March 2008-2025 daily ignition average of 2.3. The largest wildfire in March grew to 164 acres northeast of McArthur in a Tule marsh and became the first large fire of the season. The regional large fire average for March based on a 1992-2024 database is 0.30. The regional planning level (PL) remained at 1. Prescribed burning fluctuated between pile and underburn projects. During the heat wave event project implementation lessened due to heightened flammability and weather prescription restrictions. Projects noticeably increased at the end of the month, ahead of precipitation.

Extended dry-warm and cool-moist periods will likely occur during April although an overall drier and warmer than normal tilt is expected through June. Some of the analog years and dynamic climate models suggest active lightning during July, which could result in an abnormally high number of ignitions. If ENSO transitions to El Niño as expected during the next few months, tropical storm activity across the east Pacific should be robust and could portend a few moisture intrusions northward. Some of the dynamic climate models are also suggesting an active North American Monsoon, although there are mixed signals on that. 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.

Based on the current fuel state and future weather predictions, normal large fire potential is projected for April throughout northern California due to a few persisting barriers to fire spread including green-up and residual snow melt. In May, significant fire potential will elevate to above normal in the Sacramento Valley-Foothills and East Bay areas as herbaceous fuels there will be mostly cured early in the month and will likely be impacted by several gusty-dry wind periods. Historically May is typically a light large fire month. During June, the above normal area expands across most of the region excluding the northwest corner, where timely moisture intrusions are more likely during the spring thus lessening the possibility of live fuel moisture stress. Elsewhere, curing should be evident across the lower and mid elevations and combine with both onshore and offshore gusty-dry wind events. Large fire occurrence historically increases more noticeably from an average of 2 during May to 12 during June. Critically flammable live and dead fuel alignments are likely to expand during July with large fire activity driven by a healthy mix of heat, wind, and lightning. Live fuels across the highest elevations of northern California are likely to be less stressed during July although most of the snowpack should melt off during May which is unusually early by several weeks, if not a couple of months. Drought is likely to develop across portions of the region during the next four months. There will be several impactful wildcards to consider during the next few months including potential freeze killed fuels in April due to cold periods following an unusually early start to the growing season, rearrangement of the fuels across the Sierra Foothills due to “snow crush” that occurred during the mid-February snow storm, and herbaceous loading that includes the possibility of a second germination across some low elevation areas during April.

Sea surface temperature (SSTs) anomalies surrounding the Hawai’ian Islands were near to above average during March. Average temperature anomalies were near to above normal. Deep tropical moisture found ahead of two Kona Lows brought extended periods of substantial moisture between March 10-24. Precipitation was generally above to well above normal across the island chain although there were a couple of small pockets of near to below normal. Drought conditions noticeably eased with only 7% of the island chain in some sort of drought

classification on March 24 compared to 55% on February 24. Strong southerly to westerly winds also occurred during the month but were accompanied by higher humidity. Herbaceous green-up was noticeable across the leeward sides because of the abundant precipitation. No Red Flag Warnings were issued by the National Weather Service for Hawai'i in March. There was one moderately sized fire north of Waimea on the island of Kaui March 7-8.

The El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is expected to transition quickly from La Niña to a neutral state and eventually El Niño during this four-month outlook period. Near to above normal temperature and precipitation anomalies in Hawai'i are likely during the period. If El Niño can establish itself quickly during the dry season, then tropical cyclone activity is likely to increase across the east Pacific and could influence the region's weather. Drought stress is likely to improve even further with very little impacts likely during the outlook period. Robust herbaceous green-up will likely serve as a heat sink during the next couple of months but could be a spread enhancer down the road once it cures. Normal significant fire potential is projected in Hawai'i for the four-month outlook period.

Southern California

Strong high pressure off the California coast brought above normal temperatures to the entire region for much of March, with prolonged record heat March 12-21. Temperatures for central and southern California were well above normal for the month and will be the hottest March on record for many locations. The strong high pressure off the California coast also caused there to be little or no rainfall across the region in March. Well above normal temperatures caused rapid melting of the snowpack over the Sierra and over the mountains of southern California. By the end of the month, the Sierra snowpack was less than 50% of normal and across southern California snow only remained on the peaks of the highest mountains. A trough dropping into the Great Basin and Desert Southwest from the Pacific Northwest brought a moderate to strong Santa Ana wind event to southern California March 6-8. Otherwise, there were no significant winds across the region for the month.

Abnormally dry conditions now exist across the Sierra and near the Colorado River, but there continues to be no drought across central and southern California. Both the 1000-hr and 100-hr dead fuel moisture started near average in March. However, hot and dry conditions caused them to substantially drop shortly thereafter. By the end of the month, there was widespread record low dead fuel moisture for this time of year. The live fuel moisture reached its peak by the middle of the month but remains well above normal and it will continue to gradually decrease through the spring and summer months. The hot and dry conditions caused rapid curing of the grasses at the lower elevations, and they are expected to be totally cured by the middle of April.

Sea surface temperatures off the West Coast remain well above normal and computer models show that they will remain above normal through the summer months. Therefore, high pressure off the California coast is likely to remain the dominant weather feature through June. Temperatures will likely remain well above normal, and rainfall will likely remain below normal. Also, the marine layer will likely not be as deep or penetrate as far inland as normal April through July. By July, the persistent area of high pressure is more likely to become centered over the Desert Southwest or Great Basin. The monsoon will likely start a little later than normal, but there will likely be a near normal amount of shower and thunderstorm activity by the middle or end of July. With this, the potential for significant fires in southern and central California is expected to remain near normal April through July, as periodic large fires are normal across the region during the summer months.

Northern Rockies

The outlook for April through June will be normal for significant wildland fire potential for the Northern Rockies Geographic Area (NRGA). In July, the northern part of the Idaho Panhandle will show above normal potential, with the remainder of the NRGA showing normal. The past winter has produced a complex moisture picture where low snowpack does not reflect the near normal precipitation that has fallen November through March. The moisture is present in the landscape, just deeper in the soil. The area that is likely to see the least amount of moisture through the spring is the western part of the Idaho Panhandle, which may experience above normal wildfire activity in July.

The first half of March continued the above normal temperature and below normal precipitation trend seen in previous months, but in the middle of the month precipitation began to occur more frequently and temperatures were not quite as far above normal. The U.S. Drought Monitor still shows an area of extreme drought over north-central Montana with severe drought over a larger surrounding area extending into southwest Montana. Another pocket of severe drought is over the western panhandle of Idaho. The remainder of Montana and north Idaho is abnormally dry or showing moderate drought with North Dakota reflecting no drought status.

A multiple day period of dry air followed by a windy and warm day triggered multiple large fires March 8 with another event on March 18-20 associated with well above normal temperatures. The nature of the pre-greenup fire season has been enigmatic, as a substantial snow event on March 13 eroded quickly with fire activity arising on March 18 in the same areas that had been covered by six inches of snow just days before. The fires on March 18 triggered Interstate 15 closures. After March 12 there was a noticeable absence of the wind events that had been a major driver of previous fire events over the winter and early spring.

Despite active wildfires arising in March, trends moving forward do not indicate significant departures from normal spring fire activity. A significant weather pattern change will occur at the beginning of April with a slower moving wet and cool system projected to traverse the region. This system will provide short-term relief and support continued green-up, increasing the presence of live fuels in the landscape. Week two (8-14 day) outlooks reflect normal conditions for the region, and the monthly outlook for April does not show a dramatic anomaly. Models through the middle of the month favor a progressive pattern which should result in multiple rounds of showers throughout the month, but windows of warmer and dry weather can be expected. This supports the normal forecast for the month.

No substantial departures from normal are expected for May and June, so the normal significant fire outlook will continue. July shows hints of a warm signature for the Pacific Northwest, which would likely influence lower elevations of northern Idaho. This area is less likely to benefit from spring moisture patterns that impact most of the NRGA and could dry earlier than normal given the below normal snowpack. Portions of the Idaho Panhandle should expect above normal significant wildland fire potential in July, which is a trend of recent years. The remainder of the NRGA is expected to have normal activity in July.

Great Basin

A much warmer and drier than normal winter and early spring has pushed fuels to record dry levels across the southern half of the Great Basin. Record low snowpack exists in the southern half of the geographic area. With warm and dry conditions expected to continue this spring, we are looking for an earlier start and more severe than normal fire season for many areas.

Temperatures over the last 30 days have been extremely warm, 5-10 degrees above normal for most of the region, while precipitation has only been 20-40% of normal across most areas. It has been much drier in far southern areas, just 5-10% of normal. The U.S. Drought Monitor has most

southern and central areas in moderate to severe drought, with a few southeastern areas now in extreme drought. The shorter-term Evaporative Demand Drought Index is showing three-month readings of the most extreme levels across most of the southern and eastern portions of the geographic area.

Snowpack is now at record low levels across Utah and much of Nevada, only 10-30% of normal, with a few basins near Arizona devoid of snow at all observed sites. Farther north across the Idaho and Wyoming mountains, snowpack is noticeably higher, 50-75% of normal, which is still significantly below normal, and much of the middle slopes in those areas that are normally snow covered have been bare for quite some time.

Fuels in the southern half of the Great Basin are near or exceeding record dry levels. Some areas in the far south and east are seeing current Energy Release Component values that are typical of early June. However, most lower elevation areas are looking at expectations of a much lower than normal grass crop this season, due to the dry winter and spring conditions. The exceptions are across parts of northern Nevada and southern Idaho, where there are pockets of more carry-over fuels from the past two years. The current record warm and dry conditions are leading to an earlier start to green-up that has already begun in the lowest elevations in the south and should move into the mid elevations in the first half of April. If the current forecast of warm and dry conditions continues through the spring, green-up would likely end earlier and give way to full curing sooner than normal across the region, especially in southern and central areas.

Fire activity has been picking up in recent weeks, mostly small fires ranging from one to 10 acres. Recently, some larger fires of 20-100 acres began emerging, including a timber fire in the Uinta Mountains above 7,000 feet. This is very unusual for late March and reflective of the record low snowpack, where many heavier fuels that would normally be under several feet of snow have been bare for many weeks.

As an earlier than normal green-up ensues, April and most of May should see normal significant fire potential. Above normal fire potential is expected to begin across the south the latter half of May, mainly in the middle to upper elevations where heavier fuels are dominant. Above normal potential will then spread steadily northward into central Utah and Nevada in June, then into southern Idaho in July.

Southwest

The Desert Southwest was held in the clutches of persistent well-below average precipitation throughout March in concert with historic heat. While localized instances of wetting precipitation were noted across portions of central and southern areas, extreme atmospheric dryness has caused quick vegetative rebound and subsequent stress. These events occurred on a stage set by a lackluster winter, with much below average snowpack. This situation is worsened in southern Predictive Services Areas (PSAs) where snowpack is negligible. Better moisture and a few more robust precipitation events have been the saving grace of the southern PSAs thus far, keeping them a few weeks behind their neighbors in regard to dry fuel states. Overall, however, the dry conditions resulted in the continuation and expansion of drought across the Southwest Area (SWA), with all of New Mexico entering moderate drought or worse on the U.S. Drought Monitor. Areas of severe drought have expanded in coverage to include areas along and west of the Continental Divide in New Mexico, with additional development across the southern mountains and lowlands. Arizona retains localized areas where drought is not present, but it is anticipated that drought conditions will develop.

Larger fuel classes hit record dryness for March across the SWA, a situation exacerbated across the northern PSAs. Above normal fuel loading continues to be an issue across the eastern plains, where little green-up has been observed amongst the grasslands. In addition to drought stress, the SWA has multiple forests with expansive tree mortality in pinon-juniper and ponderosa pine

stands, especially in portions of the Lincoln, Coronado, and Gila National Forests. Mortality, dry fuels, above-normal fine fuel loading, and continuity across fuelbeds are contributing to high fire danger.

Wildfire activity in the SWA in March included large fires focused across New Mexico. Wind-driven fires were common across the central and eastern plains, one of which burned more than 1,000 acres. In the absence of wind, the fires were quickly contained. A fire displaying active fire behavior burned several hundred acres in the central bosque, an uncommon event for the Rio Grande Valley in March. The south-central mountains experienced one large fire during marginal Red Flag conditions late in the month.

While La Niña continues to weaken, active upper-level troughing will continue to deliver breezy to windy conditions across the SWA. Occasional slugs of moisture will give rise to isolated to scattered storms in April, but incredibly dry air at lower levels will inhibit much precipitation from reaching the ground. Due to this combination, above normal significant fire potential was continued or added for southeastern Arizona, the Gila Mountains, the mountain areas of New Mexico, and the New Mexico eastern plains in April. These conditions are not expected to improve moving into the heart of fire season in the Southwest, with above normal potential will continue for these areas for May, with the addition of all northern and south-central Arizona PSAs, the Mogollon Rim, and New Mexico's Rio Grande Valley. By June, green-up should improve across the New Mexico eastern plains with a return to normal potential, with normal potential returning to all areas in July as monsoon season begins in earnest. Overall, given the expected drought conditions, state of fuels, and potential for active weather, the SWA should be prepared for increased and above normal potential for significant fires over the next three months.

Rocky Mountain

March was dominated by more hot temperatures and a continued lack of precipitation. This has led to worsening drought across the Rocky Mountain Area (RMA). Several strong, but dry, cold frontal passages resulted in historic fire activity across Nebraska this month. The continued warmth and dryness are limiting green-up, increasing significant fire potential in western Nebraska, eastern Colorado, and western Kansas. May should have enough green-up to limit fire growth. By June, the heat and long-term drought will increase the potential on the West Slope and Front Range of Colorado. This increase will continue into July, with the hope that monsoon moisture may start to influence the area over the summer.

Continuing the long string of warm months, March once again has been 5 to 10 degrees above normal across the RMA. This was despite a mid-month cool down following a strong cold front that brought temperatures into the teens and 20s. Many daily high temperature records were broken, some by close to 10 degrees, with some locations setting new monthly records. There were several strong cold fronts that brought strong wind gusts exceeding 70 mph to the central Plains of the RMA. Much of western Kansas and southeast Colorado have not seen any measurable precipitation in March, while most of the remainder of the RMA was also below normal. Due to the hot and dry weather, moderate drought continued to expand across southern Colorado and Kansas, while central and eastern Nebraska has seen rapidly expanding severe to extreme drought.

Moisture content in larger diameter fuels at higher elevations is well below average for this time of year, with the Front Range in Colorado approaching values typical of peak fire season. Low precipitation and snow cover continue to leave fuels more receptive to large fire growth. These factors combined with greater than normal fuel loading resulted in above average fire potential for this time of year, particularly east of the Divide into Kansas and Nebraska. Wind events continue to be the primary driver for large fire growth in the area.

Fire activity in the RMA was highlighted by unprecedented fire activity in Nebraska during the middle of March, when several large wind-driven fires emerged. This led to two Complex Incident Management Teams mobilizing to manage the multiple large fires in Nebraska that collectively burned over 800,000 acres. The Black Hills also saw several fires that required outside resources to assist in suppression.

La Niña has been slower to diminish than previously forecasted but will still come to an end by May. While we remain in this La Niña pattern, temperatures are expected to remain above normal and precipitation will remain lower than average. A brief period of neutral conditions is expected in the May and June timeframe that could return precipitation to more normal conditions. Heat, however, is expected to continue across the RMA for the outlook period. An El Niño is likely rapidly develop over the summer. The time of this rapid transition is going to have a significant impact on the monsoon, leaving increased uncertainty into July.

Given the drought conditions on the central Plains of the RMA, delayed green-up, and increased fuel loading, significant fire potential will remain above normal in April from western Nebraska and eastern Colorado into western Kansas. This will primarily be during the increased winds of cold frontal passages. May should see enough green-up to limit significant fire potential to normal, though increased initial attack is likely in the higher elevation areas that would traditionally just be seeing snow melt off. In June, the increasing heat in already drought-stressed fuels on both the West Slope and Front Range of Colorado will increase significant fire potential to above normal. This elevated potential will continue into July regardless of the progression of the monsoon, as any initial monsoon moisture surges would be accompanied by drier thunderstorms increasing ignition potential.

Eastern Area

Normal significant fire potential is forecast for the Eastern Area through July. There are areas that are in long-term drought, including a band from the Iowa-Missouri border eastward to Lake Erie, northern Minnesota, eastern New England, and the Mid-Atlantic, including much of Pennsylvania. These areas could have elevated potential during windy days that follow dry periods, but enough precipitation is likely to occur to keep potential near normal the next few months.

Precipitation was near or well above normal for much of the Eastern Area during March. Areas around Lake Michigan and in central Illinois and Indiana received over 300 percent of normal precipitation, mostly in the form of snow. Northern New England, much of Minnesota, a sliver of northern Missouri into southern Iowa, and much of the Mid-Atlantic saw below normal precipitation, with the most widespread deficit along the Mid-Atlantic coast where only around 30% of normal precipitation was observed. Snowpack has largely melted out by April 1, with only the northernmost areas of the Great Lakes and the Northeast holding onto snow cover.

Despite some very cold outbreaks over the past month, temperatures were above normal across the region. Temperatures in the northern Great Lakes area were closest to normal, above the mean by only a couple of degrees, while areas near the Ohio River averaged 7-10 degrees above normal. New England and the Mid-Atlantic were generally 3-5 degrees above normal.

The U.S. Drought Monitor shows that drought persists across portions of the Eastern Area. A band from the Iowa-Missouri border eastward to Lake Erie has the strongest drought signal with some areas of extreme drought identified. New Hampshire to Maine and the Mid-Atlantic states are identified as being in severe drought. Northern Minnesota has a significant area in moderate drought. Compared to last year at this time, there is approximately 10% more area in moderate to severe drought.

Fire activity increased in March. Missouri saw the earliest signs of increasing activity after a quiet start to the month, and Pennsylvania soon followed suit. The western tier has also seen an

increase, though fire activity has been very sporadic as weather conditions fluctuate. The last weekend in March saw a big jump in activity with the first dry and windy weather following snow-off across a wide swath from Missouri to Minnesota. The increase in activity falls into normal for this time of year. Periodic bursts of activity that coincide with dry and windy weather will likely continue through April.

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. The area of warmer than normal does expand farther north later in the four-month period. Precipitation is likely to be above normal for April from Lake Superior south to the Ohio Valley, with no favored category for May through July for all areas except the Mid-Atlantic states, where there is a slight tilt towards wetter than normal.

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 the Big Rivers, northern Minnesota, and the Mid-Atlantic is concerning, but a wet start to April is expected to mitigate the concerns to some degree. Northern Minnesota is of most concern due to heavy concentration of dead, blowdown fuels from last year's derecho and the persistence of a mostly dry pattern. As is typical, activity will spread north and east through the spring, with wildfire activity starting to decrease in the southern tier later this month as green-up alters the landscape. Dead fuels from the ice storm in northern Lower Michigan will also be an area to watch as spring progresses.

Normal significant fire potential is forecast for the next four months as the Eastern Area continues into its spring fire season. As mentioned above, areas of long-term drought in Missouri, northern Minnesota, and the Mid-Atlantic are of concern, but the wet start to the month will keep potential normal most of the month. In addition, green-up is likely to evolve in Missouri by mid-month, keeping potential normal. The Mid-Atlantic will continue to be monitored for above normal potential into May where long-term drought persists, especially in the pine barrens and in the hills of West Virginia. In the Great Lakes, if areas of drought do not green-up in a typical time frame, it could result in drier fine fuels during the peak of spring fire season. At this time, confidence is too low to depict above normal potential, but those conditions warrant heightened monitoring throughout the spring season.

Southern Area

A lingering spring fire season that bleeds into summer is likely for the Southern Area. Dry and abnormally warm conditions in March brought intensifying drought to large parts of the region, boosting wildfire activity late in the month while hinting at some of the concerns that could stick around until consistent heavy rainfall returns. Excessive grass loads remain dormant in the western Plains, while January's ice storm, Hurricane Helene's blowdown, and other storm damage will continue to contribute to above normal wildland fire risks the next few months.

April will open with several critical fire weather days in the High Plains, where above normal to exceptional grass loads are the rule. Although soil temperatures are plenty warm for green-up, rainfall has been hard to come by, and the landscape largely remains dormant and volatile. Soaking rainfall has the potential to affect areas farther south and east, but an overall drier and warmer than average month is anticipated in western Oklahoma and Texas. May and June typically see a decrease in high wind events prior to nearby monsoonal activity and summer heat dominating the fire environment. If the record warm start to the year is any indication of a trend, then hot and dry conditions could maintain periods of heightened activity in the grass-dominated landscape through the period. The Texas mountains have areas of above normal grass loading, and as lightning increases during May, the potential for significant fires will increase. Rainfall could be more plentiful there in June and July with expectations for an active monsoon.

Heavier fuels downed by Helene are becoming increasingly available from Florida and Georgia into the Carolinas and adjacent areas. With underlying severe, extreme, and exceptional drought in place and no obvious short-term relief, significant fire potential will remain above normal. Green-up will inevitably reduce the footprint of burnable areas in the mountains and other hardwood-dominant areas later in April, but canopies opened by Helene in far eastern Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and adjacent areas could allow for unusual summertime fires where drought persists.

The Southeast coastal plain is of greatest concern for high-end significant fire potential the next few months, and that risk has been extended from the previous outlook into May and June. Historically low streamflow, dry swamps, and increasingly burnable organic soils are the product of 8-16 inch rainfall deficits or more going back to last hurricane season, and it may ultimately take a tropical system to replenish the region's moisture. Drought in most of the region will all but intensify in the short term. Very cold temperatures into south Florida last winter also left an unusual amount of freeze-cured vegetation that may contribute to fire activity through summer.

With La Niña on its last legs and a quick turn to El Niño imminent, the potential for extreme heat and flash drought is high in the pine-dominated Gulf coastal plain this summer. The summer of 2023 is a close analog due to the anticipated ENSO transition the next few months, but there is considerably more drought already in place across the southern tier of the region compared to that spring. It is unclear if impacts similar to that historic summer season will occur, but if drought does not ease in the short term and early season tropical activity avoids the Gulf Coast, a broad area from East Texas to Florida could see periods of well above normal fire activity through the summer.

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