# National Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook

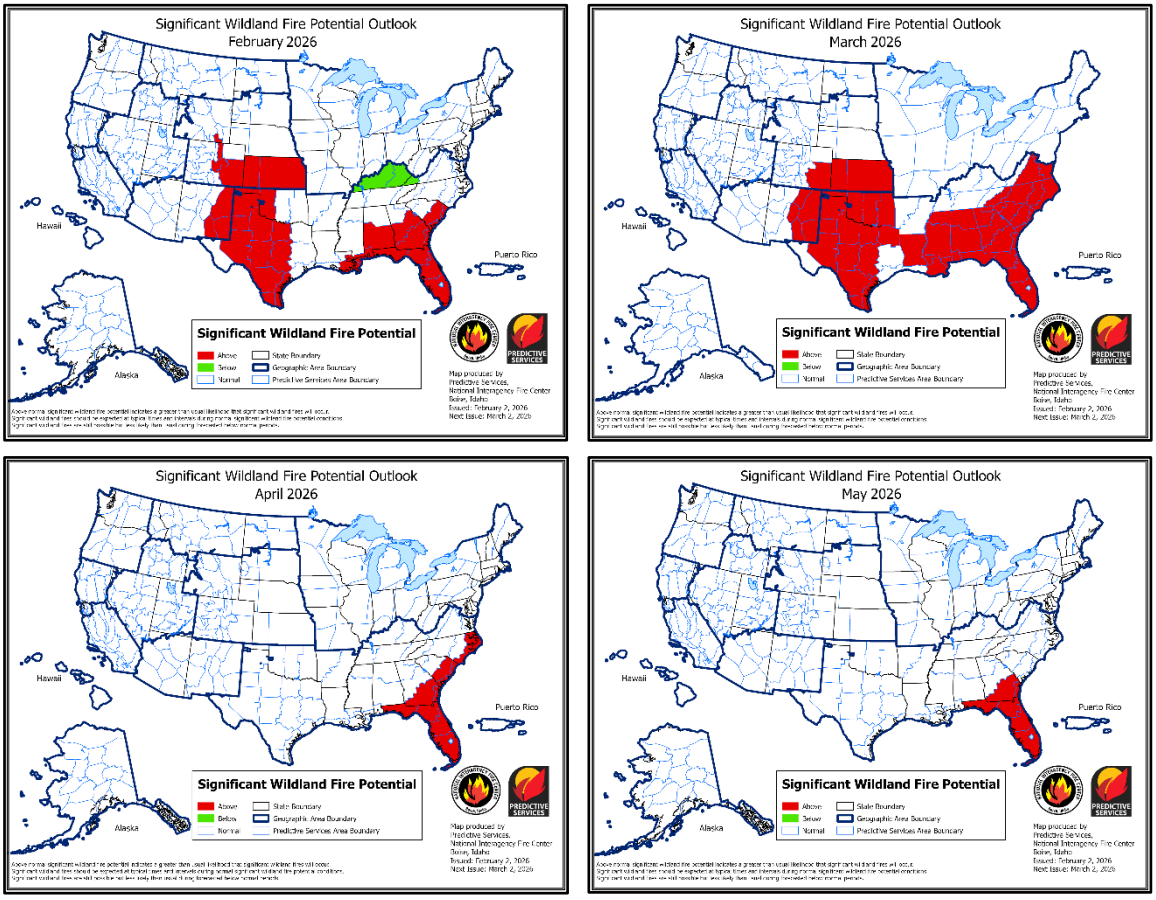
**Predictive Services**
**National Interagency Fire Center**

**Issued: February 2, 2026**
Next Issuance: March 2, 2026

**Outlook Period – February through May 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 January, although periodic modest increases in activity occurred in the Southern and Southwest Areas, typical of early winter. The National Preparedness Level remained at one (on a scale of 1-5) due to the low level of activity nationally. While fire activity was low overall, it was more active than most previous years in January. Total acres burned this year through January 30 is above the 10-year average, over 148%, with a well above average tally of wildfires at 220%.

January precipitation was below normal across most of the U.S., with well below normal precipitation observed in the northern Plains, southwest Arizona, South Texas, and most of Florida. Areas of above normal precipitation were restricted to southeast Arizona into far West Texas and in a line from Kansas to northern Michigan. Small areas of near normal precipitation were observed in Nevada, southern California, the Mid-Atlantic, and Deep South. Overall drought changed little during January with 43% of the country remaining in drought. Much of the

Intermountain West saw improvement, while drought intensified in portions of the Southwest and central Rockies. Drought improved slightly in the Deep South and Great Lakes, as well. However, drought persisted and/or intensified in the southern Plains, the High Plains, Lower Mississippi Valley, and Southeast.

Climate Prediction Center and Predictive Services outlooks issued in late January forecast temperatures are likely to be above normal in the West and below normal east of the Mississippi River for February. Precipitation is likely to be above normal near the Canadian border from Washington eastward to Minnesota, with below average precipitation expected in the southern two thirds of the West, central Plains, and portions of the Southeast. The following three months from March to May, temperatures are likely to be above normal for much of the southern half of the country, Appalachians, and East Coast as El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) neutral conditions return. Precipitation is likely to be above normal in the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley but below normal in the Southwest, Great Basin, and California.

Normal significant fire potential is forecast for the northern half of the U.S. into May, with a gradual increase in activity in the northwestern U.S., and a normal spring peak in the Eastern Area. For February, above normal significant fire potential is forecast for much of the southern and central Plains as well as the northern Front Range of Colorado. Above normal potential is forecast for most of the Southeast and northern Gulf Coast, as well. Below normal potential is expected in February for Kentucky into western Virginia. In March, above normal potential will expand to cover most of the Southern Area, except the northern tier from Arkansas to western Virginia, southeast and West Texas, and southwest Louisiana, which will remain normal. Above normal potential will continue in March in eastern New Mexico and southeast Colorado into Kansas. For April, above normal significant fire potential will be reduced to the southeast Atlantic coast and Florida, with the rest of the U.S. normal. In May, above normal potential will be confined to South Georgia and Florida. While the well below normal snowpack in the West is concerning for an early start to the season, a potentially more active weather pattern in spring would result in potential remaining near normal.

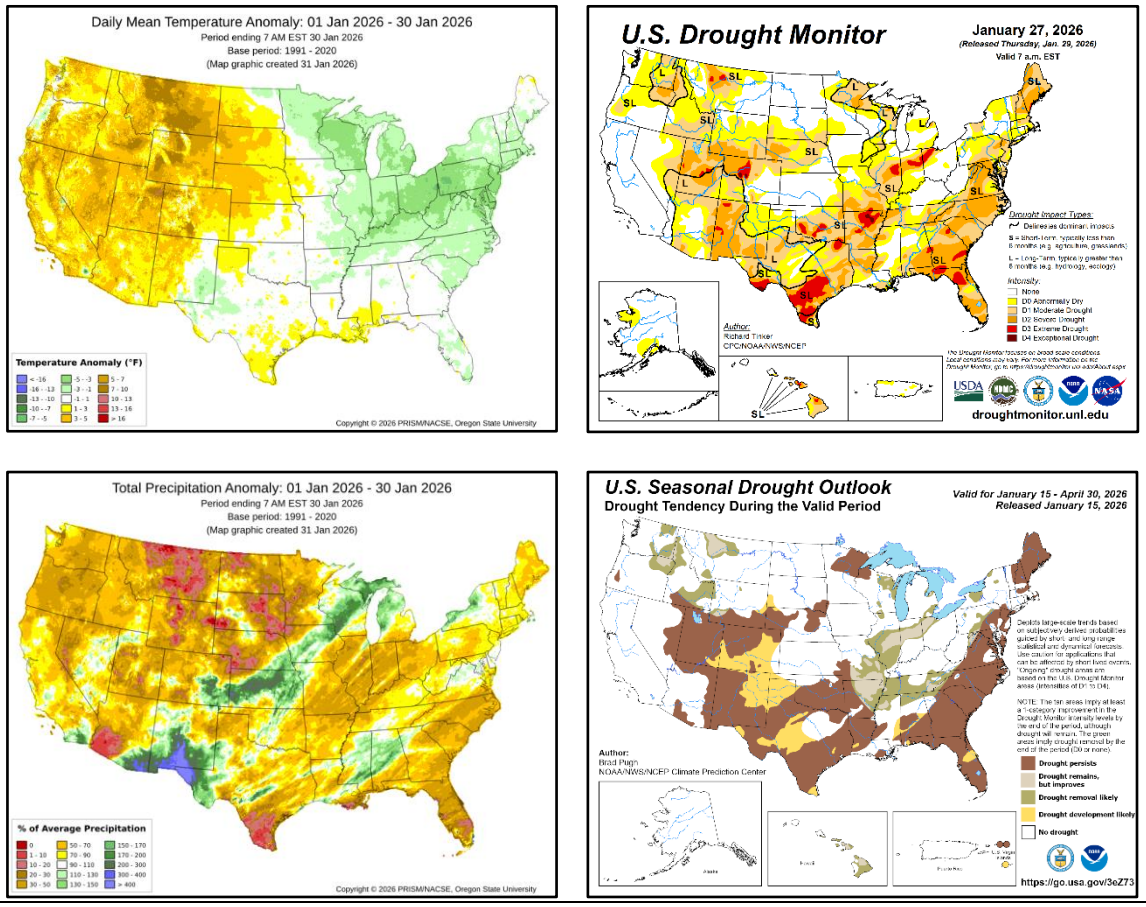
### *Past Weather and Drought*

Temperatures in January were well above normal for most of the West into the northern High Plains, but some valley locations in the West were closer to normal due to strong, long-lasting inversions. Temperatures were near normal in most of the Southern Area, with below normal temperatures for the Great Lakes, Northeast, and Mid-Atlantic. Alaska was below normal for the month, especially southwest Alaska, with most of the cold temperatures during the first three weeks of the month. Temperatures in Hawai'i were near to above normal, although the southern portion of the Big Island was below normal.

Precipitation was below normal across most of the U.S. for January. Well below normal precipitation, less than 25%, was observed in southwest Arizona, the northern High Plains, and South Texas. Precipitation less than 50% of normal was also observed in much of Florida. Small areas of above normal precipitation occurred in January in southeast Arizona, southern New Mexico, and far West Texas, then from southeast Colorado and Kansas northeast to northern Michigan. Smaller areas of above normal precipitation occurred in the Deep South, western New York, and far southern California. Precipitation in Alaska was a bit above normal for most of the state except the northwest which was below normal. Precipitation in Hawai'i was near to below normal, except for the southern third of the Big Island which was above normal.

With fire activity low across the U.S., there were no significant fire-effective events across the country in January. However, a strong winter storm affected California and much of the West at the beginning of the month with areas of flooding, but snow levels remained high. A strong winter storm moved across the country January 23-26, seriously impacting areas over a fifteen-hundred-mile swath and bringing catastrophic ice accretion to northern Mississippi and central Tennessee,

where five Complex Incident Management teams and other firefighting resources were mobilized to aid in the recovery. Extensive icing was also observed westward into northeast Texas and northeast into West Virginia with severe tree damage. Heavy snow fell with this storm from eastern New Mexico through Kansas and Oklahoma into the Ohio Valley, Mid-Atlantic, and Northeast.




**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)***.

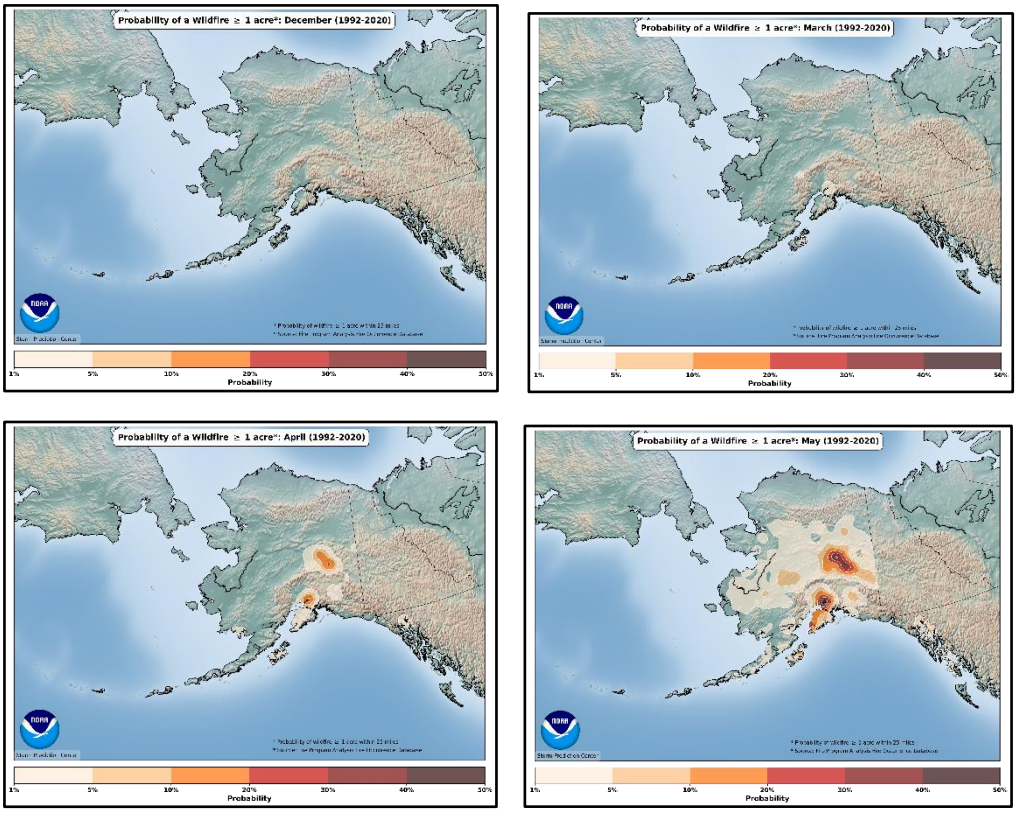
Overall drought changed little across the U.S. with nearly 43% of the country in drought as of January 27. Drought improved in the Intermountain West but developed and intensified in much of the High Plains. Drought also developed and intensified across much of the southern Plains and Lower Mississippi Valley as well as the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic. Drought improvement was also noted in the Great Lakes and portions of the Northeast, Mississippi, and Alabama. Areas of extreme drought persist in small portions of north-central Montana, central Utah, western Colorado, and western New Mexico. Other areas of extreme drought are noted in portions of South Texas, southern Oklahoma, northern Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia, North Florida, eastern Illinois, northern Indiana, and northwest Ohio. Small areas of exceptional drought exist in northern Arkansas, central Colorado, and the Big Bend. Drought persists across much of the southern Hawai'ian Islands, with small areas of extreme drought on Maui and the Big Island. Drought is expected to persist where it exists across East Coast and southern U.S., with development expected in the southern High Plains where it does not yet exist. Drought improvement is expected in Arkansas, Tennessee, southern Missouri to northwest Ohio and the northern Rockies.

### *Weather and Climate Outlooks*

The El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) remains in a weak La Niña state, but sea surface temperatures (SSTs) are warming and now averaging near 0.5 C below average in the central equatorial Pacific Ocean, showing that La Niña is weakening. The CPC forecasts La Niña to

continue to weaken, with the onset of ENSO-neutral conditions likely expected by March. ENSO-neutral conditions are then expected to persist through the spring. The negative phase of the Pacific Decadal Oscillation (PDO) persists but continues to weaken, with the negative phase now the weakest it has been in the past several years. As a result, it is likely to have less impact on this forecast than prior years. The Madden-Julian Oscillation (MJO) was active in the western Pacific recently but is weakening and forecast to remain weak into February, not factoring into this outlook. The transition from La Niña to ENSO-neutral conditions will be the main drivers of this outlook, modified by short-term changes in the Arctic Oscillation.

### *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.) Note that the December map is shown as a surrogate for February (all three peak winter months – December, January, and February – typically have minimal fire occurrence, and this December map is representative of the latter two months, which do not have their own separate monthly maps).

### 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 early April, with small, human-caused fire activity increasing in May.

January saw an increase in the area and depth of the continuous snowpack over the state, with severe cold across the Interior and heavy snow along western and southern coasts. The U.S. Drought Monitor elevated some areas to abnormally dry around the Seward Peninsula, and from the crest of the western Alaska Range eastward to encompass the Anchorage Bowl and Kenai Peninsula.

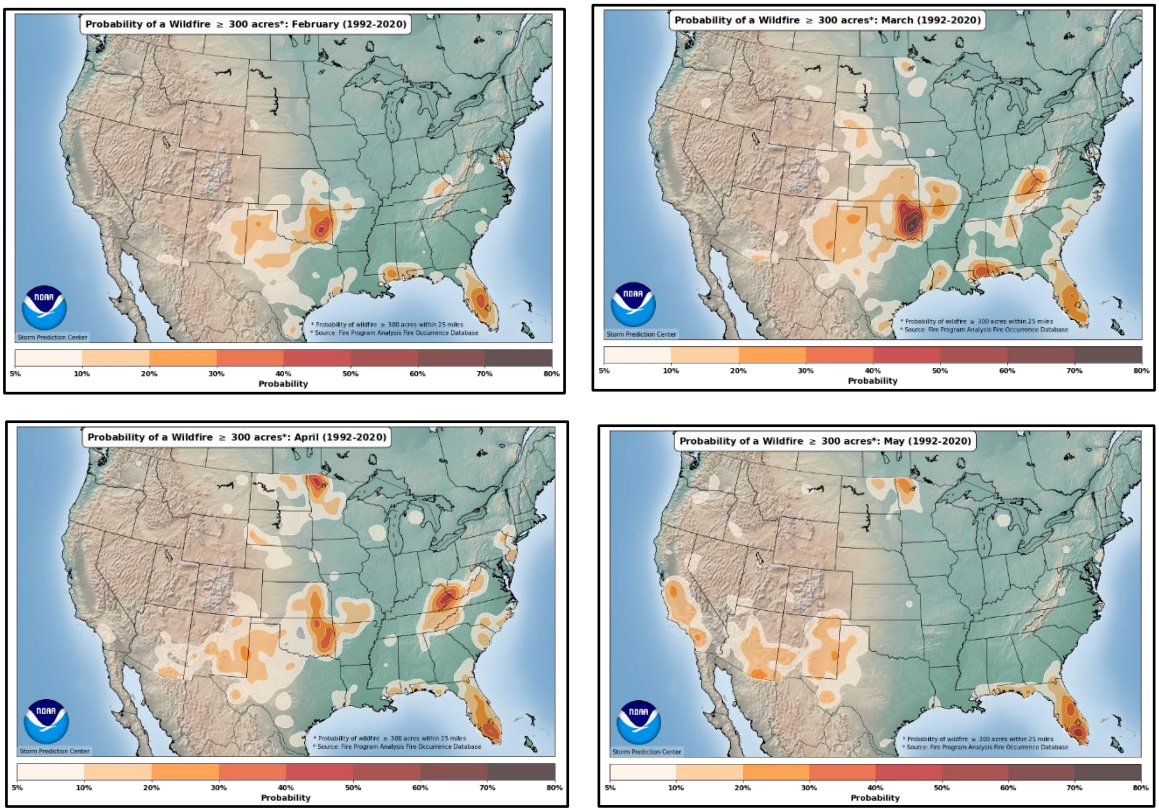
The Climate Prediction Center (CPC) outlook for February indicates warmer and wetter than normal conditions, especially for the first half of the month. For March through May, the area of warmer than normal decreases to only western Alaska, with no clear temperature anomaly trends evident for the rest of the state. Likewise, the precipitation outlook is ambiguous for the fire-prone areas of the state for the upcoming months.

Predictions for the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) indicate the shift from a weak La Niña this winter to ENSO-neutral conditions this spring. Weak ENSO conditions generally correlate with less active 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 temperatures and melt rates.

As is typical for Alaka, fire activity was nonexistent in January with no new ignitions, and fuels are snow-covered across the state. Fire weather indices have been turned off due to snowpack.

Alaska's permanent winter snowpack will remain across the mainland through March. Fire potential will remain near zero through February and March, with a little increase in small human-caused fires at the end of April and a gradual uptick in mid to late May. 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**

For the Northwest Geographic Area, the abnormally warm and dry conditions in January are poised to continue into the first part of February. Despite an increase in precipitation events late in January, amounts fell well short of what is needed to offset earlier deficits. Dead fuels remain significantly drier than seasonal averages and will stay available until more persistent precipitation occurs. Short burn windows will largely limit spread, though aligned winds could increase the potential for wildfires that challenge initial attack efforts until a marked shift toward normal winter conditions develops.

January marked a dramatic swing from December's warm and wet pattern to one dominated by high pressure, producing exceedingly warm and dry conditions across the Northwest. Persistent inversions capped temperature fluctuations in valleys on both sides of the Cascades, limiting diurnal variability, while clouds and fog tempered overnight cooling. Temperatures averaged 5 to 15°F above normal, with mid and upper slopes on the higher end of that range. Precipitation was well below normal, reinforcing drought concerns and leaving snowpack recovery stalled despite occasional light mountain snowfall. Fuels experienced significant drying, with many stations reporting fuel moisture at record low daily values for the past 25 years.

Snowpack remains near record lows given very few precipitation events. Most basins currently report less than 40% median snow water equivalent for late January, and numerous stations are below 30%.

The U.S. Drought Monitor continued to show improvement from late December across the geographic area, despite the lack of meaningful rainfall and snowpack-building events. Currently, portions of eastern Washington, northeast Oregon, and the Umpqua Basin in southwest Oregon are indicated as moderate to severe drought. Remaining areas are listed as abnormally dry or show no drought designation. No areas remain under extreme drought.

Fire activity continued to be minimal across the Pacific Northwest in January. Only isolated human-caused incidents were reported, all contained rapidly with most spread limited to less than one-quarter acre. One 13-acre fire occurred in southwest Oregon where dry conditions combined with steep terrain. Prescribed burning activity dwindled as weather became less supportive.

Dry conditions west of the Cascades allowed Energy Release Component (ERC) values to climb to daily record levels by mid-month and remain near or at record values through the end of January. Across the Cascades and eastward, ERCs generally stayed below average, although portions of southeast Oregon trended above average.

Rapid warming of sea surface temperatures over the past few weeks signals a quicker transition from La Niña toward El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO)-neutral conditions by early spring. This shift reduces confidence in prolonged La Niña impacts for late winter and spring. NOAA's Climate Prediction Center (CPC) expects an active storm track to develop at some point in February and continue into March, with above normal precipitation favored for much of Oregon and Washington, accompanied by cooler-than-normal conditions across portions of the northern tier. As March and April progress, that trend weakens as ENSO-neutral conditions emerge, resulting in decreasing confidence. By May, confidence declines further.

The CPC temperature outlooks for February and early March forecast mild to cool anomalies, particularly north of the Columbia Basin. April and May are likely to trend warmer than average, increasing drying rates if precipitation falters. Above normal precipitation is slightly favored in the outlooks for February and March, but confidence diminishes into April and May. By May, CPC indicates "equal chances", meaning no strong climate signal favors above, near, or below normal precipitation conditions.

As this new outlook period begins, normal or very low significant fire potential will persist through February and March. Single-day spread events remain possible where much drier-than-average fuels, slope, and wind align. April and May introduce greater uncertainty, but current signals are not strong enough to warrant deviating from a normal forecast. Potential begins to rise modestly in areas experiencing persistent dryness, especially east of the Cascades. However, late-spring fire activity and intensity will depend heavily on short-term precipitation patterns rather than snowpack alone. All that said, 2018, an above-average year in terms of acres burned in the Northwest, is shaping up to be a potentially strong analog year for 2026 across the Northwest Geographic Area, and trends similar to that year will continue to be monitored.

**Northern California and Hawai'i**

For northern California, significant fire potential is projected to be normal for February through May. Historically less than one large fire occurs within each Predictive Service Area (PSA) from February through May. Hawai'i's significant fire potential is also predicted to remain normal for February through May.

Whiplash weather patterns continued during January, although conditions were generally drier and warmer than normal across most areas. Most of the recorded precipitation occurred during the first weeks, including two atmospheric river events. A blocking ridge January 9-26 provided very little if any precipitation, outside of localized light drizzle. Average temperatures were near to above normal. Precipitation was below normal across most areas with localized near normal amounts. Nearly 150 lightning strikes were observed in January using the Vaisala detection system. The 2000-2025 Vaisala average is nearly 210 strikes for the month. There were three dry northerly and easterly wind events with a moderate to locally strong one occurring January 24. There was one strong to very strong southerly wind event, but relative humidity was elevated. No National Weather Service Red Flag Warning or Predictive Service High Risks were issued during the month.

Despite the moist start of January, dead fuels became unseasonally dry by mid-January and remained that way the rest of the month. Energy Release Component (ERC) values in the North Coast and Bay Marine Predictive Service Areas (PSA) breached the 60$^{th}$ percentile. Most shrub and canopy fuels remained dormant across the landscape with mixed but generally lesser flammability, although some shrub species were experiencing green-up across the lowest elevations. The latest live fuel moisture sampling indicated near normal for the time of year. Herbaceous green-up remained pronounced below 3,500 to 4,000 feet and acted as a heat sink while dormancy and a cured state was generally found above 4,000 feet. The amount of standing dead fuel from the previous growing season also continued to decline. Snow cover and moisture found within the snowpack decreased after the first week, with readings ranging from 70-90% of normal on January 8 to 40-60% of normal on January 29. Snow levels were generally found above 4,300 to 6,000 feet, depending on aspect and shading, by the end of the month. No drought conditions existed during January based on the U.S. Drought Monitor. The two-month Evaporative Demand Drought Index (EDDI) values on January 24 showed dryness markers across the far east, especially impacting portions of Lassen, Modoc, and Washoe Counties.

Wildfire business in northern California was generally minimal during January, although initial attack numbers increased during the extended dry stretch. The daily wildfire ignition average during this January was nearly 1, similar to December's average, and this was less than the January 2008-2025 daily ignition average of 1.6. No significant wildfires were reported, with the largest being 10.5 acres in logging slash two miles north of Mad River on January 24. The regional large fire average for January based on a 1992-2024 database is 0.30. The regional preparedness level (PL) remained at one all month. Prescribed burning was active during the last three weeks of the month due to the drier conditions, despite ventilation not being as favorable. Pile burning was the dominant type although broadcast burns were also implemented.

Extended dry-warm and cool-moist periods are likely for northern California over the next couple of months. Several of the model guidance tools suggest a drier and warmer than normal February with above normal amounts of offshore wind events. Storm activity should increase during March and lead to a mixed anomaly environment. The storm track is expected to turn drier and warmer than normal during April and May.

Based on the current fuel state and future weather predictions, normal significant fire potential is projected for February through May, which means very little potential overall. Critically flammable live and dead fuel alignments are likely to be minimal although some extended dry-warm periods could create unusually flammable conditions, which could benefit broadcast prescribed burning but also create unusually high initial attack numbers for the time of year. Lowland herbaceous green-up, upper elevation snow, and shortened burn periods will lessen the large fire potential overall. Dry-gusty wind events following an extended dry period would create the most spread potential during the next four months. May is anticipated to be a more active fire business month due to quickly curing lowland herbaceous fuels and a below normal snowpack; therefore, we will be monitoring trends accordingly.

Sea surface temperature (SST) anomalies surrounding the Hawai'ian Islands were above average during January. Average temperature anomalies were mixed but generally near normal with an area of below normal across the Big Island. Precipitation anomalies were mixed with above normal across portions of western Oahu and southern portions of the Big Island while near to below normal existed elsewhere. The most active precipitation period occurred January 3-5 due to Kona Low influences. The strongest wind flow occurred January 14-15 ahead of a frontal passage. Drought intensity improved slightly on the Big Island, but the overall drought footprint remained the same between late December to late January. Moderate to extreme drought was found from Oahu southward to the Big Island, with the extreme rating found across portions of Maui and the Big Island. Herbaceous green-up remained mixed across the leeward sides. No Red Flag Warnings were issued by the National Weather Service, and there were no reported significant fires in Hawai'i in January.

The El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is expected to transition from a weak La Niña to a neutral state early during this outlook period. Near to above normal temperature anomalies are expected for Hawai'i. Precipitation anomalies should be near to above normal. Drought stress is likely to lessen or improve over time across the entire island chain although leeward portions of the Big Island and Maui are likely to remain in a stressed mode for a large part of the outlook period. Herbaceous green-up should also increase across the leeward areas and lessen the spread potential. Normal significant fire potential is projected for Hawai'i for this four-month outlook period although pockets of unusually flammable conditions will exist from Molokai southward to the Big Island.

**Southern California**

Outside the beginning of the month, January was warmer and drier than average in central and southern California. Strong high pressure dominated much of the month, preventing much in the way of intrusions of cold or moist air. Temperatures were near normal across the San Joaquin Valley where there was persistently stubborn Tule fog for much of the month, but temperatures were two to four degrees above normal for most other areas. Significant precipitation that occurred during the end of December spilled into the very beginning of January, particularly for southern California. After this early January storm, dry conditions prevailed for the rest of the month. The lack of additional rounds of January precipitation led to most of the region experiencing below normal precipitation for the month, though most areas remained above 50% of normal. The snowpack for the central and southern Sierra is now running 50–80% of normal due to the lack of precipitation for most of the month. There has been little to no snowfall over the southern California mountains since snow levels were very high during the storms of December and early January.

Offshore flow was a common occurrence throughout January, but there were no strong Santa Ana wind events. A couple of prolonged weak to moderate events occurred during the middle of the month.

As January ends, the U.S. Drought Monitor shows no drought nor abnormally dry conditions currently over California. This reflects the very wet start to the winter season, with multiple major storms from October through December.

After the early January storm, all classes of dead fuel moistures trended significantly above seasonal normal. Dead fuel moistures then dropped for most of the month in response to the persistent warm and dry weather, bringing values well below normal. The main exception was the San Joaquin Valley, which was under persistent Tule fog and cooler temperatures most of the month, keeping fuels more moist. A cooler pattern late in the month brought dead fuel moisture closer to normal in many areas. Live fuel moisture has exhibited significant increases in response to significant precipitation from December to early January. Live fuel moisture is now well above normal for this time of year with bountiful green-up across most low- and mid-elevation bands across the region.

Current sea surface temperature (SST) anomalies in the tropical Pacific continue to indicate that the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) conditions remain in the cooler La Niña phase. Projections indicate that La Niña will continue the next month before transitioning to ENSO-neutral this spring. With weak La Niña in place, the overarching weather pattern will continue to favor high pressure over the western U.S. into the late winter and early spring, keeping warmer and drier weather in place across central and southern California. The weaker nature of La Niña may allow for some significant storms to make it into central and southern California at times when dominant high pressure weakens and the weather pattern becomes more progressive. This would be most likely to occur in February and March, becoming less likely in April and May ahead of the climatological dry season. Climate outlooks favor below normal precipitation over the next few months, but if a couple significant storms were to move through the region, precipitation could ultimately trend closer to normal. For the spring months, storms would be more likely on the warmer side, and the chances of significant snowfall at lower elevations would be reduced. Like what has occurred so far this winter, weak to locally moderate offshore wind events will continue to be common under dominant high pressure. For stronger events, troughing and cold air outbreaks need to occur in the central U.S., which could happen under periods of stronger and more persistent high pressure over the western U.S. While not a high confidence projection, climate outlooks do not indicate this to be likely over the next few months.

Despite the expected warm and dry pattern, the potential for significant wildfires is expected to remain minimal through April. Significant precipitation from late last year into the beginning of January has brought about a significant increase in live fuel moisture and associated green-up across the low and mid elevations, providing strong and widespread barriers to fire spread. An increase in grass fire activity will likely start to occur in May as finer fuels cure, especially if conditions remain drier than normal; however, overall fire potential will probably remain near normal.

**Northern Rockies**

Significant wildland fire potential is expected to remain normal across the Northern Rockies Geographic Area (NRGA) through the outlook period. Most of Montana and Idaho are experiencing a top-five warmest winter, and dryness is expanding on the landscape. This raises concerns for potential fire activity, but December and January are typically drier months in the NRGA, and a single weather event in February can dramatically reverse conditions and reduce fire threats. Colder northwest flow aloft has brought typical winter conditions to North Dakota, which contributes to stronger confidence in the projection for normal fire potential.

January has been exceptionally dry across central and eastern Montana and northwest North Dakota, which reverses the above normal precipitation trend seen in December. North Idaho and western Montana have been abnormally dry, as well, with little to no precipitation reported since January 8. This dry January is beginning to offset December precipitation surpluses, but the 60-day percent of normal precipitation still shows a net gain of moisture for most of the NRGA. This has led to a decrease in drought coverage, especially in western Montana. Pockets of severe to extreme drought remain in north central Montana and north Idaho, but the remainder of the NRGA is reporting either no drought or abnormally dry conditions.

Temperatures have been above to well above normal this winter in north Idaho and much of Montana and normal in northeast Montana and North Dakota. This prevented a permanent snowpack from being established for many areas and facilitated evapotranspiration, drying top level soils. Snowpack started well in November but was eroded by rain in early December and was not replenished. Combined with warm temperatures, snowpack in many basins is showing below normal values, which is an important trend to track into the spring months.

In January, wildfires occurred during a mild and windy period mid-month, but they were mostly small and east of the Continental Divide. Small amounts of prescribed fire consisting of pile burning continued but other planned burning was hindered by a lack of snow cover.

Moisture content in 1000-hour dead fuels is tracking near normal for most areas but there have been strong below normal trends in 100-hour dead fuels east of the Continental Divide. December snow compressed fine dead fuels, which has been a potential beneficial factor in slowing fire growth.

Close attention should be given to the recovery, or lack thereof, of mid-elevation snow in areas that typically offer opportunities for prescribed fire in the spring. Not only might snow be absent during burning operations, but a prolonged lack of snow cover could lead to abnormally low fuel moisture in large dead fuels, creating conditions that differ significantly from what burners typically expect in those areas.

Forecasts for February through May favor normal moisture and temperatures. This represents a shift from forecasts of potential below normal temperatures and above normal moisture projected since fall. Long range patterns are less certain as La Niña breaks down and neutral conditions develop during March. It is possible below normal precipitation could be expected in April and May, which starts the wettest season for the region. It is premature to be concerned that spring dryness would be aligned with weak winter snowpack to generate increased significant fire potential, but that scenario is being tracked.

**Great Basin**

Normal significant fire potential is expected throughout the Great Basin through May. This is normally the wettest time of year for most areas 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 in March and April across low elevation areas where last year’s grass crop remains in place due to a lack of snow compacting the grass.

Central portions of the Great Basin have been considerably drier and warmer than normal so far this winter, with large areas of moderate to severe drought across much of the area and a few spots of extreme drought in central Utah. Snowpack is well below normal across much of Nevada and Utah with only the mountains of central Idaho, western Wyoming, and the Sierra Front showing snowpack above 80%. However, the snowpack has not extended down to middle elevations as it normally does most winters.

Heading into February, fuels conditions remain well below critical levels, keeping wildfire activity minimal, as is typical for the season. However, some southern areas are reporting abnormally low fuel moisture levels and some near record dryness for the time of year.

Over the next four months, near normal to wetter than normal conditions are possible for northern areas while continued drier and warmer than normal conditions will persist for the central and southern half of the Great Basin. This warm and dry pattern could result in slightly more wildfire activity across the central and southern areas prior to green-up in late spring, but fires should mostly 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. If spring green-up is early and weak, large fire activity may increase earlier than normal in late May. For now, all areas are forecast to experience normal significant fire potential for the February through May outlook period.

**Southwest**

As of late January, the U.S. Drought Monitor indicated widespread areas of persistent moderate to severe drought across much of the Southwest Geographic Area. This includes all of New Mexico except the northeast corner of the state, plus all of Arizona except the far west and central portions of the state. These drought conditions are expected to persist or worsen through spring, with warmer and drier than normal conditions expected, especially in Arizona.

Precipitation in January was below normal across much of Arizona and northeast New Mexico, except for well above normal precipitation in southeast Arizona and southern New Mexico due to a late January storm. The Climate Prediction Center (CPC) forecasts La Niña conditions will shift to El Niño-Southern Oscillation-neutral later this winter. Therefore, precipitation is expected to remain below normal through early spring. However, there is a likelihood that storms will bring periods of precipitation to offset the dryness in some areas during February and March.

Temperatures in January averaged three to six degrees above normal across most of the region, except for just below normal temperatures over eastern New Mexico due to repeated cold air intrusions. The CPC outlook for February calls for above normal temperatures to continue across much of the region.

Despite warmer and drier conditions, wildfire activity was minimal during the month of January, as is typical for this time of year. The CPC outlooks call for warmer and drier than normal conditions to persist through spring, which may result in a slight increase in fire activity as those impacts accrue. The main concerns heading into late February, March, and April will be the well above normal fine fuel loading over eastern New Mexico, especially northeast New Mexico, as the wind season begins. Above normal fire potential is possible in these areas later in February once the beneficial effects from late January snow and cold abate. Above normal significant fire potential will continue through March and may linger into April, depending on the weather pattern and timing and magnitude of green-up. There is low confidence in the temperature and precipitation forecasts in March and April. Therefore, if periods of cooler temperatures and precipitation routinely occur, this may lower fire potential. By May and June, concerns will increase in the mid to higher elevations of Arizona and northern New Mexico where snowpack will likely remain well below normal and melt off quickly due to above normal temperatures forecast amid long-term drought.

**Rocky Mountain**

January in the Rocky Mountain Area (RMA) was generally warmer and drier than average, with a brief Arctic blast east of the Divide. Snowpack remained below normal outside western Wyoming,

and drought largely remained unchanged. Fine fuels on the eastern plains and foothills, combined with increased winds, remained the primary drivers of fire danger, as larger fuels are dry but not critical. Fire activity has been modest, centered in southwestern South Dakota and along the Colorado Front Range. As La Niña fades toward neutral conditions, expect short wind-driven windows of above normal potential on the Front Range through February, elevated chances in southeastern Colorado and western Kansas into March, and near normal significant fire potential elsewhere in the RMA.

Throughout January, temperatures across the RMA remained well above normal, with much of the area one to three degrees warmer than average. However, the Wind River and Bighorn Basins in north-central Wyoming, the Green River Basin in southwest Wyoming, and Colorado's San Luis Valley averaged near typical values. This occurred despite a pronounced cold snap east of the Continental Divide during the third week of the month. The area from southeast Colorado through most of Kansas and into southeastern Nebraska was the only portion of the RMA that was wetter than normal. Elsewhere, precipitation generally fell below 70% of the 30-year average, with portions of Wyoming, South Dakota, and Nebraska receiving under 10% of normal totals. Warm, dry conditions kept snowpack under 70% outside western Wyoming, where snowpack is near normal. However, snowpack in western Wyoming is mainly at the higher elevations, above 9,000 feet, with snowpack well below normal below that elevation. Drought was largely unchanged, with western Wyoming improving on the U.S. Drought Monitor to abnormally dry, while severe drought expanded across southeast Wyoming, northeast Colorado, and the Nebraska Panhandle over the last 30 days.

Exposed and dry fine fuels on the eastern plains and foothills continue to be the main concern. Larger fuels are drier than average but not nearing critical levels. Snowpack and snow cover have remained sparse outside the high elevation mountains. Infrequent snowfalls followed by warm dry periods have provided little relief for fine fuel moisture. Strong wind events continue to be the primary driver for fire danger in the area.

Wildfire activity has been concentrated in southwestern South Dakota and along the Front Range. Alignment of dry fine fuels and gusty winds has been responsible for the fire growth observed so far this year. The RMA has seen minimal fire activity for January, with 30 fires for just over 1,400 acres. All fires were contained by local resources.

La Niña continues to weaken and is expected to end in February or early March. Despite a transition to El Niño-Southern Oscillation-neutral conditions, long-range guidance for the RMA still resembles a La Niña-like pattern favoring above normal precipitation in Wyoming, drier conditions in southern Colorado, and near normal elsewhere. Temperatures will likely be warmer than normal in southern Colorado, near normal across most of the remainder of RMA, with Wyoming and South Dakota at times trending slightly colder. February and March typically bring more wind events as additional low-pressure systems move through, which can briefly elevate fire potential.

With low- to mid-elevation fuels largely snow-free and the RMA entering a typically windier period, the Colorado Front Range will see above normal significant fire potential in February, occurring in brief two- or three-day windows. From February into March, as southern Plains temperatures rise and winds strengthen while fuels remain dormant, southeastern Colorado and western Kansas are likely to experience elevated fire chances like the past two years. Across the rest of the RMA, significant fire potential is expected to remain near normal into May.

**Eastern Area**

Normal significant fire potential is forecast for the Eastern Area through May. 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 as the spring season commences, but

uncertainty in the weather forecast precludes designating any areas of above normal potential at this time.

Most of the Eastern Area received below normal precipitation during January, except across most of Iowa, Wisconsin, and the northern half of Michigan, which were above normal. Above normal precipitation also occurred in western New York due to lake-effect snowfall, with portions of the Mid-Atlantic coast near normal. Temperatures also averaged below normal across most of the Eastern Area, especially the second half of the month as multiple Arctic blasts affected the region. Due to the cold temperatures, snow cover expanded across all the Eastern Area except in portions of Iowa, which is unusual to have such extensive snow cover in southern areas.

The U.S. Drought Monitor indicates 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 southern Missouri and eastward along the Ohio River into Indiana, with small areas of intensification in the Mid-Atlantic. However, drought has improved and been removed in many areas of the Lower Great Lakes into western New York. Small areas of extreme drought persist in eastern Illinois to northwest Ohio, with a small area having developed in southern Missouri.

Recent fire activity has been minimal overall the past month, and most fires have occurred in southern Missouri. Occasional large fires have occurred in southern Missouri, with the largest the Math Branch fire northeast of Branson at 700 acres.

Overall temperatures forecast by the Climate Prediction Center (CPC) are likely to be below normal in the Midwest for February, with above normal temperatures likely in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic March through May. Other areas have equal chances of above or below normal temperatures throughout the period. Precipitation is likely to be above normal for the Great Lakes to the Ohio River and Appalachians with equal chances elsewhere.

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, focused on March and April. Combining these weather factors with increased human ignition activities like debris burning, hunting, and warming fires, leads to the expectation that the Eastern Area may occasionally have days of above normal fire activity in some southern areas in the latter half of February after the snow melts. Southern Missouri will need to be monitored for March as long-term drought led to increased activity so far this winter. 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. Ice damage in West Virginia from the late January winter storm is still being evaluated but is much less than areas to the southwest in Tennessee and Mississippi.

Normal significant fire potential is forecast for the next four months as the Eastern Area heads into its spring fire season. Areas of long-term and intensified drought in southern Missouri may present more of an issue in March if wind events like last year occur. However, confidence is too low that far out to forecast the incidence of wind events coupled with low relative humidity. Farther north, snow cover will limit activity through February and mid-March, with a seasonal increase in activity expected later into March, April, and May. Normal potential is expected for these three months across the rest of the Eastern Area. However, if drought were to emerge or intensify in the Great Lakes and Mid-Atlantic, it may result in drier fine fuels during the peak of spring fire season, especially in the fuel damaged areas.

**Southern Area**

It is hard to believe the spring fire season is right around the corner, given the persistent wintry weather that brought significant impacts to the Southern Area in late January. There are

uncertainties left behind by the two winter storms that affected the region – namely, potential compaction of the abundant grasses across the Plains, in addition to ice damage in pine-dominant areas farther east. Where compaction may have occurred, which is still being assessed by state forestry partners, the potential for wind-driven fires will require longer periods of drying than in places with standing grasses. Alternatively, timber areas with sensitive pine trees will see the addition of abundant cast needles and other fine debris that will be receptive to fire within a matter of weeks. Increased debris burning will also amplify ignitions and potential escapes, enhancing significant fire potential during warmer and drier weather that will return in short order.

Above normal significant fire potential is maintained across a large portion of the southern Plains during February and March in this outlook, though areas with lingering snow and ice will take longer to reach their full potential. The combination of drought and abundant grasses should be most problematic during late February and March in Texas and Oklahoma, then confidence decreases in the timing of green-up by April. Western areas of both states could potentially see continued risks later into April and even May, which will be assessed on subsequent updates pending feedback on January's winter storm impacts and higher confidence weather and climate outlooks in the transition out of La Niña. The only change to the outlook for March is the addition of eastern North Texas, where substantial ice damage occurred in January.

The Lower Mississippi Valley, Middle Tennessee, and southern Kentucky saw the most severe damage from the ice storm, and risks were increased from the previous outlook over Louisiana and north Mississippi for March. Both states also have long-standing issues with drought or storm damage and beetle kill that may contribute to above normal significant fire potential. While areas farther north will eventually see potential increases in wildfire activity, continued colder weather in February and the likelihood of a wetter pattern during late winter and spring may limit drying of fuels for the spring fire season. This pattern has not yet materialized, resulting in worsening drought over Arkansas into areas just east of the Mississippi River. Confidence is lower in below normal significant fire potential there, which was shifted to Kentucky and southwest Virginia due to expectations for lingering wintry impacts much of February and the potentially wetter pattern later in the month.

Some areas in the Carolinas and north Georgia were trimmed from above normal significant fire potential in February due to persisting wintry weather, at least early in the month. Otherwise, broad areas of the Southeast are forecast to see above normal significant fire potential, with peak conditions during the height of the spring fire season in March. Helene and more localized ice storm damage will contribute to significant fire potential until green-up is in full swing. Drought and its impacts have grown progressively worse in most of the southern Appalachians and Piedmont, but widespread severe and increasing extreme drought will be most impactful into late spring closer to the coast. Swamps and waterways in the lowest elevations are unusually dry for this time of year due to rainfall amounts the past six months that are five to 15 inches below average. As green-up begins, any residual moisture will be drawn down rapidly in the warmer and drier than average pattern expected through at least March. Human-caused wildfires have already been increasing because of the drought and increased debris burning, and the addition of lightning ignitions amid warmer temperatures could make for a very busy few months across Florida, South Georgia, and the Carolina pocosins. Some of the analogs for this spring suggest wetter conditions during April and May, but it will take time to remedy the impact of the current drought.

Abnormal dryness is affecting small areas of Puerto Rico, with some moderate drought in the northern U.S. Virgin Islands, but the pattern has not been as dry as expected. Normal significant fire potential is now expected in the Caribbean throughout the period.

***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**