National Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook

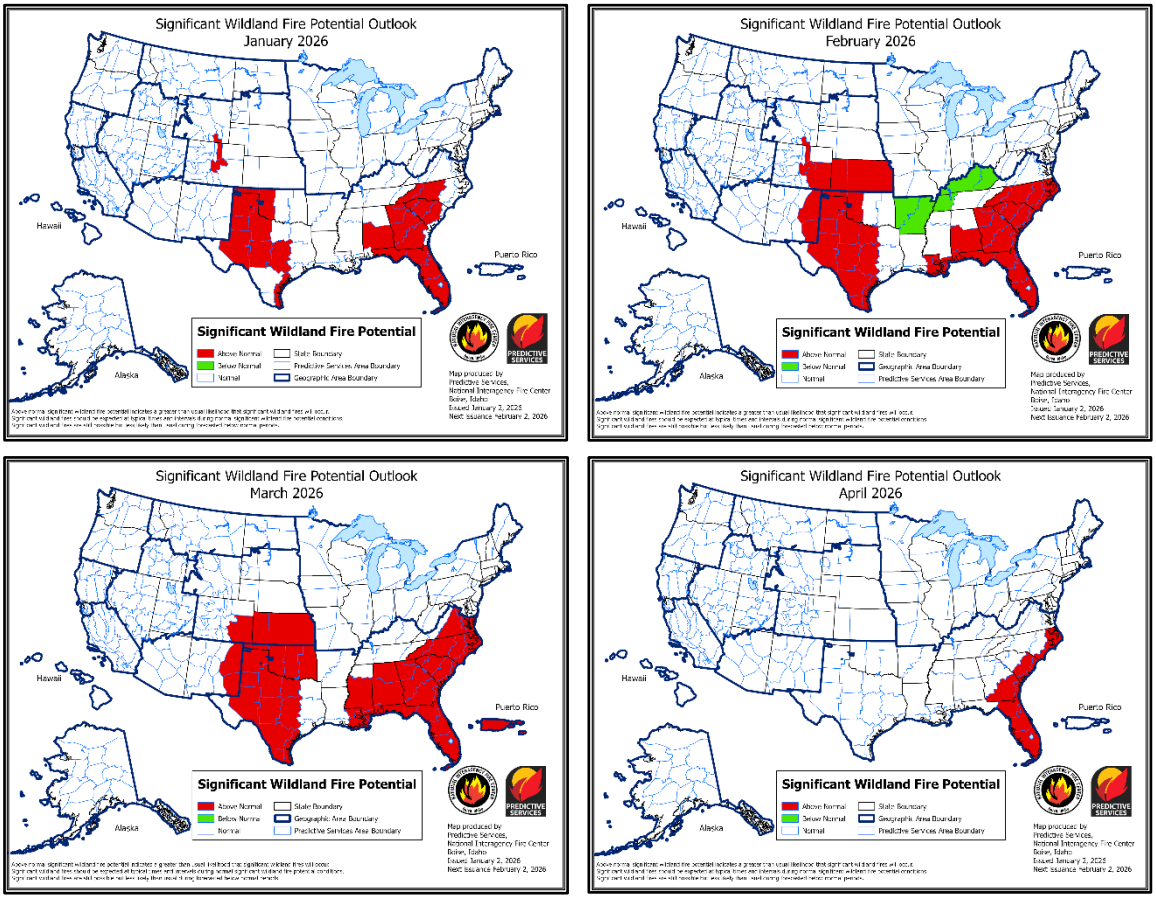
Predictive Services
National Interagency Fire Center

Issued: January 2, 2026
Next Issuance: February 2, 2026

Outlook Period – January through April 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 US through December, although periodic slight increases in activity occurred in the Southern Area, 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. Total acres burned through December 26 is below the 10-year average at less than 68%, but with an above average tally of wildfires of 122%. Final 2025 fire statistics will be available in the 2025 National Interagency Coordination Center Annual Report issued by the end of January.

December precipitation was below normal in the Southwest and central Rockies eastward into the central and southern Plains, Appalachians, and Mid-Atlantic. Above normal precipitation occurred in most of California and the northwestern US into the northern Plains. Precipitation was also above normal in most of Michigan and along portions of the northern Gulf Coast. Overall drought changed little with nearly 43% of the country remaining in drought. Much of the West Coast saw improvement, while drought intensified in portions of the Southwest and central

Rockies. Drought developed and/or intensified across much of the southern and central Plains into the southern Appalachians but improved along the northern Gulf Coast.

Climate Prediction Center and Predictive Services outlooks issued in late December forecast a pattern typical of La Niña into early spring. Temperatures are likely to be above normal across the southern third of the US during the winter, then spread up the East Coast during early spring. In the West, above normal temperatures are expected in January, then temperatures are likely to be near to below normal near the Canadian border from Washington into northern Minnesota for February into April. with equal chances of above or below normal temperatures elsewhere. Precipitation is expected to trend below normal for the southern tier of the US, particularly in the Southwest and along the Gulf Coast. Precipitation is likely to be above norma in the West for January and continue for the northwestern US into Apri, with above normal precipitation also likely across the Great Lakes into the Ohio Valley through the winter and early spring.

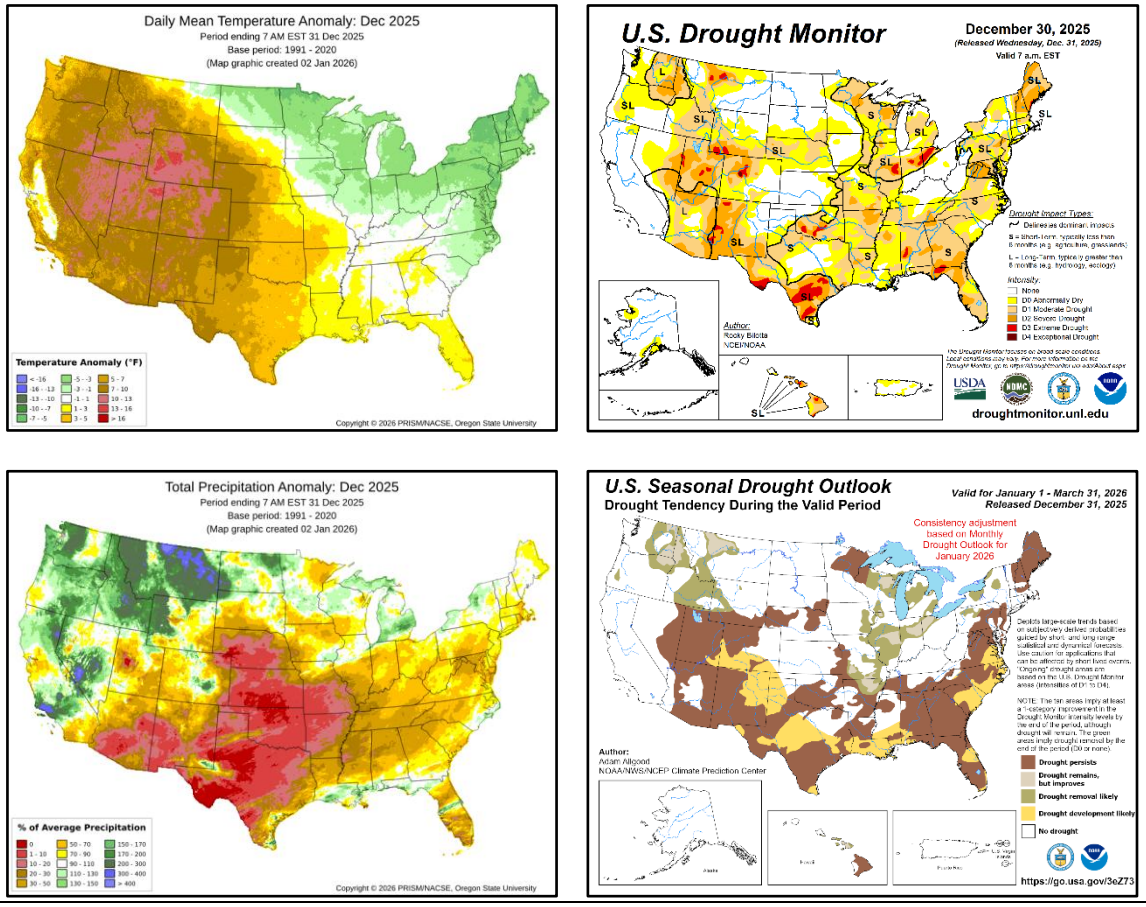
The northern half of the US is forecast to have seasonally low significant fire potential for the outlook period, but the southern half of the US will have above normal significant fire potential overall. In January, above normal potential is expected across most of the southern Plains, the Colorado Front Range, and much of the Southeast, including Florida. Above normal potential will expand across almost all the southern Plains into Kansas in February while persisting along the Front Range. Above normal potential will also expand in the southeastern US to cover the northern Gulf Coast into the Carolinas. However, a slower start to the spring fire season is forecast from Arkansas northeast into Kentucky due to the forecast above normal precipitation the next two months. March will have expansive coverage of above normal potential, covering much of the central and southern Plains, then east of the Mississippi River to the Carolinas and Virginia. Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands will have above normal potential in March, as well, at their normal end of the dry season. For April, much of the US is forecast to return to normal potential, but above normal potential is forecast to persist in much of Florida and along the Southeast coast.

Past Weather and Drought

Temperatures in December were well above normal for most of the West into the High Plains, with anomalies of 10-15°F above normal in much of the Great Basin and central Rockies. However, much of the California Central Valley was near normal due to strong inversions and fog. Temperatures were below normal from the northern Plains to the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic, with portions of the Northeast more than 5°F below normal for the month. Temperatures in the Southeast were near normal, although the Gulf Coast and much of Florida were slightly above normal. Alaska was very cold for December and well below normal, with portions of the Interior more than -20°F below normal. Temperatures in Hawai'i were near to above normal, with the greatest departures from normal on the Big Island.

Precipitation across the US in December was above normal across much of California and the northwestern US, with some areas receiving 200-400% of normal precipitation. However, there were some localized dry spots in the Bay Area, southwest Oregon, and northern Columbia Basin. Despite the above normal precipitation in the northwestern US, mountain snowpack is well below normal for most areas, due to the warm nature of the storms and high snow levels. Precipitation was well below normal across the Southwest into the southern and central Plains, with many areas receiving less than 20% of normal precipitation. Much of the central Rockies, Ohio and Tennessee Valleys to the Appalachians and Mid-Atlantic were below normal, as well as most of the Florida peninsula. The northern Gulf Coast received slightly above normal precipitation for December, with most of it occurring at the beginning of the month. New England received below normal precipitation, but much of Michigan was above normal. Precipitation in Alaska was below normal except for portions of the central Interior, which received periods of light snowfall despite the very cold temperatures. Precipitation in Hawai'i was bifurcated, with Kauai and Oahu above normal, but Molokai south to the Big Island were below normal.

With fire activity low across the US, there were no significant fire-effective events across the country. However, periods of strong winds on the southern Plains and in the Southeast resulted in increased initial attack at times. There were also two strong downslope wind events in the Front Range and eastern Colorado mid-month where winds locally exceeded 100 mph along the Front Range, but effective mitigation efforts resulted in only one significant fire on the plains. Meanwhile, the northwestern US received heavy precipitation in the middle of the month due to two strong atmospheric rivers that resulted in extensive flooding across western Washington.



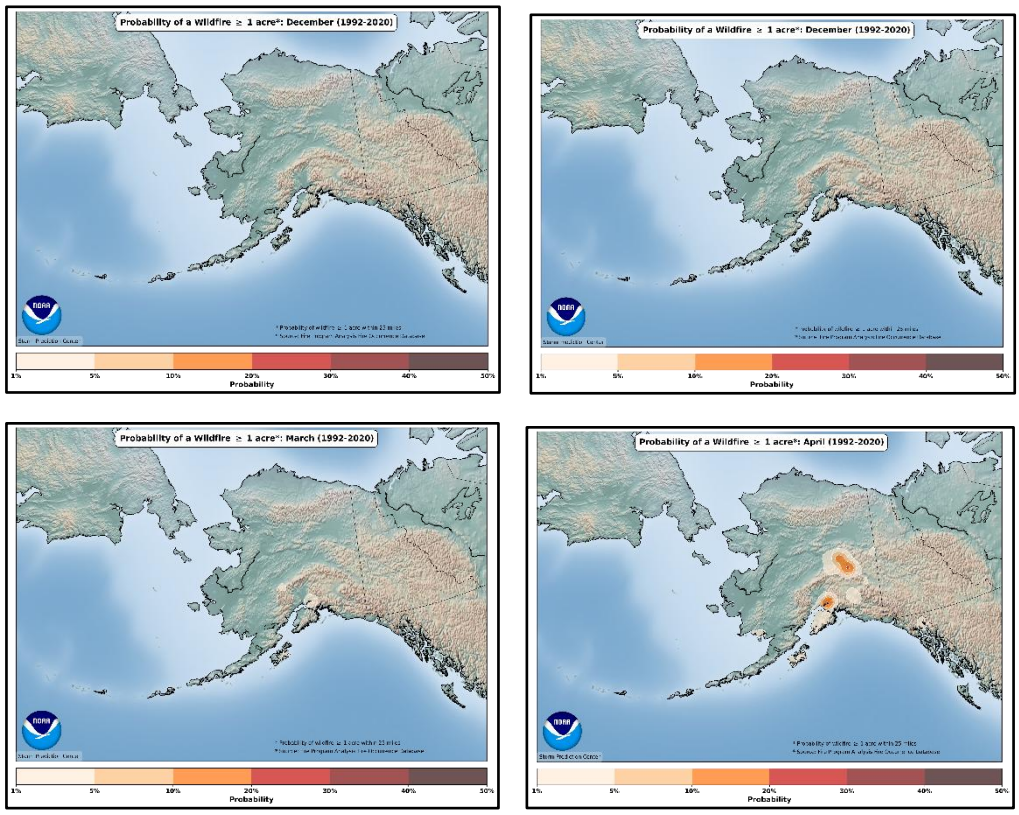
Left: Departure from Normal Temperature (top) and Percent of Normal Precipitation (bottom) ***(from PRISM Climate Group, Oregon State University).*** **Right: U.S. Drought Monitor (top) and Seasonal Drought Outlook (bottom)** ***(from National Drought Mitigation Center and the Climate Prediction Center)***.

Overall drought changed little across the US with nearly 43% of the country in drought as of December 30. Drought intensified across most of the central and southern Plains. Drought also developed and intensified from the Mid-Mississippi Valley to the southern Appalachians, with small areas of development or degradation in the Mid-Atlantic and central Rockies. Drought improved along the northern Gulf Coasts and persists in a less severe state. Drought also improved in the northwestern US with drought removal in much of western Oregon and Washington, while drought was also removed along much of the California-Nevada border. Small areas of drought improvement also occurred in the Midwest. Areas of extreme drought persist in small portions of north-central Montana, central Utah, western Colorado, southwest, Wyoming, east-central Arizona, and western New Mexico. Other areas of extreme drought are noted in portions of South Texas, southern Oklahoma, Alabama, North Florida, eastern Illinois, northern Indiana, and northwest Ohio. Drought persists across much of the southern Hawai'ian Islands, with small areas of extreme drought on Maui and the Big Island. A small area of exceptional drought has developed on the Colorado West Slope and Texas Big Bend. Drought is expected to persist where it exists across the southern US, with development expected in many areas from the Lower Colorado River east through the southern High Plains to the Gulf and Southeast coasts. Drought improvement is expected in Arkansas to the Great Lakes, as well as much of the northwestern US.

Weather and Climate Outlooks

The El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) remains in a weak La Niña state, with sea surface temperatures (SSTs) averaging between 0.5 and 1 C below average in the central equatorial Pacific Ocean. The CPC forecasts a weak La Niña to persist into for the next month or two, but with increased confidence in a transition to ENSO neutral conditions by March, with a 66% chance of transition. The negative phase of the Pacific Decadal Oscillation (PDO) persists but has weakened significantly over the past two months as SSTs in the eastern North Pacific Ocean have warmed to near to slightly above average. The Madden-Julian Oscillation (MJO) has been weak over the past two weeks and is expected to remain weak into mid-January and not factor in this outlook. As a result, the weak La Niña and the negative PDO 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 twice as a surrogate for January and February (all three months typically have minimal fire occurrence, so no maps were produced for January or February).

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.

December increased the area and depth of the continuous snowpack over the state, with severe cold across the Interior and heavy snow and rain along southern coastal areas. A series of dry wind events scoured snow from parts of south-central Alaska and heightened fire potential in a

few isolated areas, mainly around the Susitna Valley. The US Drought Monitor elevated some areas to abnormally dry around Kotzebue Sound, the lower Kuskokwim, and much of south-central Alaska.

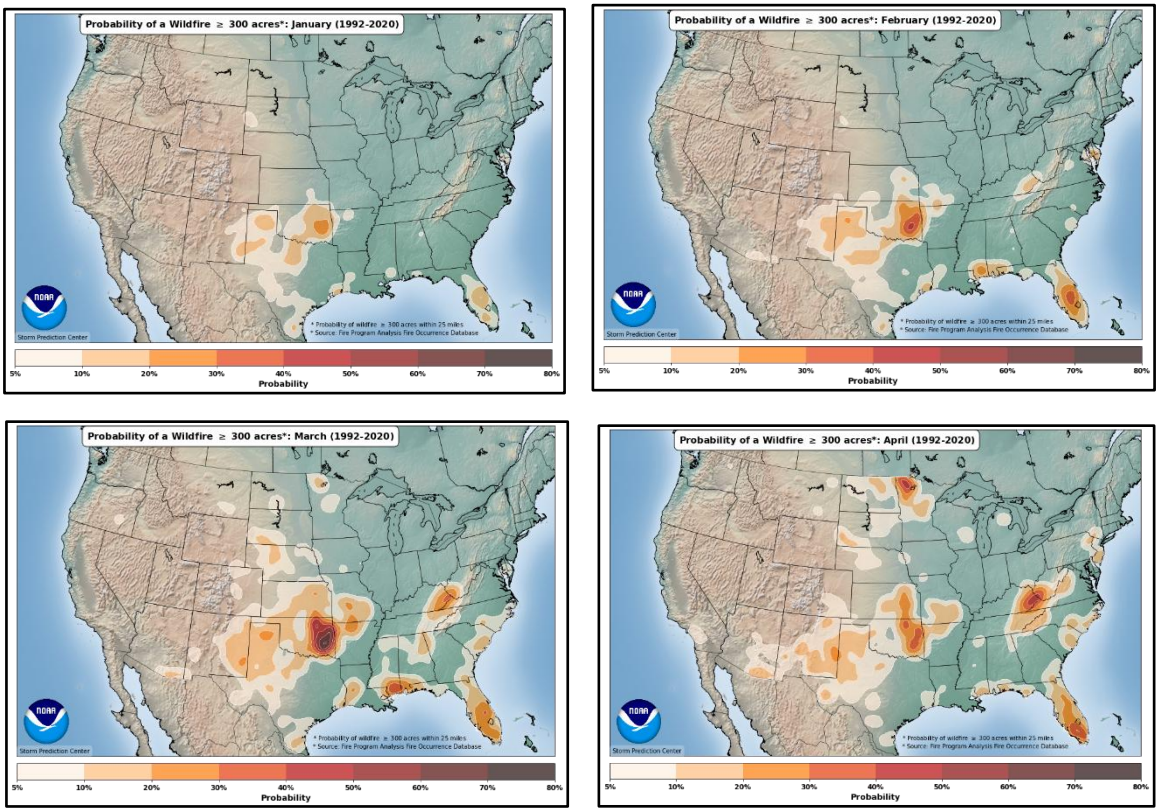
The Climate Prediction Center's outlook for January indicates that colder than normal temperatures are likely for much of the state, especially for the first half of the month. For February through April, the area of potential colder than normal temperatures decreases to cover just the panhandle, while warmer than normal temperatures become likely in the west and north. Precipitation chances don't have any strong indicators over the fire-prone areas of the state for the upcoming months.

La Niña conditions are forecast for the rest of winter, typically indicating a slightly colder and wetter winter than normal for some parts of the state. Thus far, the colder than normal trend is panning out for most areas, but wetter than normal is not.

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.

Fire activity has been nonexistent for December with no new ignitions. Fuels are very wet or snow-covered across the state. Some grass is exposed in parts of the Susitna Valley but have not been involved in fire activity this winter. Fire weather indices have been shut off statewide due to snowpack or cold, wet fuels.

As is typical, permanent winter snowpack will likely remain intact across Alaska's mainland this winter. Fire potential will remain near zero through February, with a little activity possible in March and April. This describes normal fire conditions across the state for the winter months.



Normal fire season progression across the contiguous US 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, December marked a sharp shift from November's mild, wet pattern to an exceptionally stormy and flood-prone month. Multiple atmospheric rivers drenched western Oregon and Washington, delivering record-breaking rainfall in some basins. Despite the abundance of precipitation, snowpack remained critically low across most basins due to persistently high freezing levels and warm air intrusions. Fuels across the region are thoroughly saturated, leaving significant fire potential at its seasonal minimum. Given the wet conditions and seasonal low levels of fire activity, plus the long-term forecasts for normal to above normal precipitation and normal to cooler than normal temperatures through the winter, significant fire potential is expected to remain normal for the January through April outlook period. However, deficient snowpack and the potential impacts of late winter and early spring weather patterns reduce confidence in this prediction for April.

December was dominated by relentless Pacific moisture. A series of strong atmospheric rivers produced widespread flooding, landslides, and infrastructure impacts across western Oregon and Washington. Rainfall totals exceeded 200% of normal in many areas, while mountain locations recorded over 20 inches of liquid precipitation during peak events. Southwest Oregon and north-central Washington were impacted less and ended the month with precipitation deficits. Temperatures averaged several degrees above normal, with some eastern locations finishing ten or more degrees above average. Many locations set new records for December warmth.

Snowpack remains near record lows despite abundant moisture, as warm storms delivered rain at elevations that typically accumulate early-season snow. Most basins currently report less than 50% of late December median snow water equivalent, underscoring the warm and wet nature of recent storms.

The US Drought Monitor shows improvement in western Oregon and Washington, where many areas were downgraded to moderate drought or abnormally dry classifications. In contrast, moderate to severe drought persists across the Washington Cascade east slopes, eastern Washington, and northeast Oregon, where precipitation deficits and slow soil moisture recovery remain.

Fire activity in December was negligible across the Pacific Northwest. Persistent wet conditions and saturated fuels eliminated opportunities for ignition or significant growth. Only isolated human-caused incidents were reported, all contained rapidly with most spread limited to less than one-quarter acre. Prescribed activity dwindled as weather became less supportive.

December's repeated soaking rains pushed dead fuel moisture to its highest seasonal levels while live fuels remained fully dormant. Energy Release Component (ERC) values ended the month near annual minimums across most Predictive Services Areas (PSAs), with only southeast Oregon (PSA NW12) slightly above average due to lack of snow cover. Even during brief dry breaks, humidity stayed elevated, preventing any meaningful drying. Fuels remain unreceptive to ignition under normal circumstances.

Weak La Niña conditions are expected to persist into mid-winter before transitioning toward ENSO-neutral by early spring. This pattern typically supports continued storminess through January, followed by a gradual moderation in February and March. While variability is likely, analog years suggest a tendency for drier-than-average conditions to emerge by late spring. Snowpack recovery remains uncertain; while January storms may add to mountain snow, initially elevated freezing levels could limit gains.

Analog years corresponding to similar ENSO conditions and forecasted trends suggest one winter month could feature deep troughing and much colder-than-average conditions. Deterministic weather models indicate January begins warmer than normal, leaving a narrow six-week window

for a cold snap to occur during the remaining winter months. Confidence remains low regarding timing or occurrence of such a cold snap.

Above-normal precipitation is favored for January across Oregon and Washington, driven by continued storm activity. February and March show weaker signals, with a slight favor toward above average precipitation. April historically trends drier, and current guidance aligns with that expectation. Snowpack will likely remain below normal unless storm tracks shift farther south for colder temperatures and lower snow levels to produce several periods of moderate to heavy snowfall.

As is normal, significant fire potential in the Northwest will remain very low through winter. Even as conditions begin to dry in March, elevated fuel moistures and lingering cool temperatures will likely suppress fire danger. April remains uncertain, though a meaningful increase in potential is unlikely before late spring without a prolonged warm and dry anomaly.

Northern California and Hawai'i

For northern California, significant fire potential is projected to be normal for January through April. Historically less than one large fire occurs within each Predictive Services Area (PSA) from January through April. Hawai'i's significant fire potential is expected to be normal for January through April, as well.

Whiplash weather patterns were experienced in northern California during December. Unusually dry, generally warm, and strong inversion conditions occurred during the first half of the month due to blocking ridges. An abrupt switch to a more active storm track with several atmospheric river events occurred during the latter half of the month. Precipitation was above normal across most of the area with near to below normal across the Greater Bay Area. Average temperatures were generally near to above normal. A total of 925 lightning strikes were observed using the Vaisala detection system. The 2000-2017 Vaisala average for December is 251. There were two weak to moderately strong dry northerly and easterly wind periods. There were four windy to very strong southerly wind events, but relative humidity was generally elevated in these events. No National Weather Service Red Flag Warnings or Predictive Services High Risks were issued in December.

December experienced one notable extended drying period, which brought dead fuels into the unseasonably flammable category during the earlier half of the month. A significant moistening period occurred during the latter half of the month and brought dead fuels into the unusually moist category. Only one PSA breached the 60th percentile Energy Release Component (ERC) value, and it was the Northern Sierra PSA between December 12-14. Shrub and canopy fuels were dormant across most of the landscape with mixed but generally lesser flammability. Herbaceous green-up remained pronounced below 3,500 feet and acted as a heat sink while dormancy and a cured state was generally found above 3,500 feet. The amount of standing dead fuel from the previous growing season also continued to decline. Due to the distinct dry and moist periods, snow cover varied quite a bit during December. Snow cover and moisture found within the snowpack increased noticeably after December 22, with snow levels generally found above 4,500-5,500 feet and snow water equivalent values ranging between 50-70% of normal by December 30. The US Drought Monitor shows no drought conditions existing in northern California during December. The two-month Evaporative Demand Drought Index (EDDI) value on December 25 showed dryness markers across the far east, especially impacting portions of Lassen, Modoc, and Washoe Counties.

Wildfire business was generally minimal during December. While the December 2008-2024 ignition average is two fires per day, this December's daily wildfire ignition average was one, which trended down from November's average of two ignitions per day. No significant wildfires were reported during the month of December, with the largest being 15 acres east of Amador

Pines. The regional large fire average for December based on a 1992-2024 database is 0.15. The regional preparedness level (PL) remained at one, the lowest PL, throughout December. Prescribed burning was steady during the first half of the month with pile burns being the dominant type, although a few broadcast burns were conducted. Very little burning was done during the latter half of the month due to either unfavorable weather conditions or logistical constraints.

For the four months of this outlook period, whiplash weather patterns remain the likely weather scenario, with both extended dry-warm and cool-moist periods brought on by abrupt changes in the jet stream due to various teleconnection states. Guidance signals are mixed based on the use of analogs and projections from dynamic climate models, therefore equal chances of either above, below, or near normal temperatures and precipitation are likely.

Based on the current fuel state and future weather predictions, normal significant wildfire potential is projected for northern California from January through April, which means very little potential overall. Critically flammable live and dead fuel alignments are likely to be minimal, although some extended dry-warm weather patterns could create heightened flammability periods that would benefit prescribe burning but could also result in unusually high initial attack numbers. Lowland herbaceous green-up, upper elevation snow, and shortened burn periods will lessen the large fire potential overall. Dry-gusty wind events preceded by an extended dry period would create the most potential during the next four months.

Sea surface temperature (SSTs) anomalies surrounding the Hawai'ian Islands were above average during December. Temperature anomalies were generally near to above normal. Precipitation anomalies were mixed, with generally above normal returns across the northern tier and below normal from Molokai southward. The most significant rainfall occurred December 13-18. As a result of the precipitation patterns the drought intensity and footprint decreased across the northern tier but intensified slightly across the southern tier between late November to late December. Moderate to extreme drought was found from Oahu southward to the Big Island, with extreme drought 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 December.

The El Nino Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is expected to transition from a weak La Niña to a neutral state during the outlook period. Near to above normal temperature anomalies are expected. Precipitation anomalies should be near to above normal with more propensity for Kona Lows favoring the northern tier of the island chain. 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 part of the outlook period. Herbaceous green-up should also increase with time across the leeward areas and lessen the potential for aggressive wildfires. There will likely be enhanced trade wind periods that could temporarily elevate wildfire potential during the next few months, but normal significant fire potential is projected for Hawai'i for the four-month outlook period.

Southern California

Strong high pressure off the California Coast brought above normal temperatures to the region for December except in the San Joaquin Valley. Temperatures were 10 to 20 degrees above normal across a wide area during the second and third weeks of the month. Tule fog covered the San Joaquin Valley for the first three weeks of the month, with limited or no clearing in the afternoons due to well above normal rainfall in November. This persistent cloud cover caused well below normal temperatures over the San Joaquin Valley due to strong inversions. A couple of Pacific storms brought near to below normal temperatures December 23-27. Overall, for December, temperatures were well above normal across Southern California, except temperatures were near normal in the San Joaquin Valley.

The strong high pressure off the California Coast also suppressed precipitation, with little or no rainfall across the region through much of December. However, widespread significant rainfall occurred December 23-26 as a couple of Pacific storms moved inland over California. The snow level was between 6,000 and 8,000 feet with several feet of new snow over the Sierra and up to a foot of new snow over the peaks of the southern California mountains. With the moisture received late in the month, the total precipitation for December was near to above the normal monthly average from Los Angeles County northward yet remained below normal across the southern California deserts and other areas east and south of Los Angeles County.

There was light offshore flow with the area of high pressure for the first three weeks of the month. Strong southeast to southwest winds occurred just ahead of and with the two storms. The first significant Santa Ana wind event of the season occurred December 28-30, but no large fires emerged as favorable fuel moisture levels helped offset the risk.

Drought no longer exists across central and southern California. However, there are still abnormally dry conditions across southern California east and south of Los Angeles County and over northeast Inyo County bordering Nevada. Moisture content in large dead woody fuels dropped over the first three weeks of December away from the San Joaquin Valley due to well above normal temperatures and low humidity. These dead fuel moistures were well below normal away from the San Joaquin Valley during the third week of the month. Both the 1000-hour and 100-hour dead fuel moisture ended the month near to above normal due to significant rainfall from the two Pacific storms. The live fuel moisture has risen to between 80% and 120% and is well above normal for this time of year. Widespread green-up continues across the lower elevations of both central and southern California.

Sea surface temperatures (SSTs) warmed across the eastern Pacific Basin over the past month, which likely caused the persistent strong area of high pressure off the California Coast most of December. The below normal SSTs from Japan to Canada that occurred in November no longer exist. Models forecast that SSTs will rise slowly during the winter months. This will likely cause the dominant weather feature to be high pressure off the California Coast, resulting in weather patterns similar to those observed in December. A few significant storms will likely make it into central and southern California, but they will be few and far between. Temperatures will likely be above normal and precipitation below normal January through April. The persistent area of high pressure off the California Coast will also likely cause Santa Ana wind events to remain below normal through April. Significant fire potential will remain near normal January through April since enough precipitation is expected to keep most fuels across the lower elevations in the live category into early spring. A normal amount of grass fires will likely occur in April as fine fuels start to cure.

Northern Rockies

Significant wildland fire potential is expected to remain normal across the Northern Rockies Geographic Area (NRGA) through the outlook period. While temperatures across the western NRGA have trended well above normal in November and December, weather patterns have deposited above normal precipitation over the landscape. East of the Continental Divide and in southwest Montana there has been a slightly drier trend with above normal temperatures, but signals are not strong enough to indicate above normal fire potential. Farther east, northwest flow aloft has been a frequent supplier of Arctic air producing below normal temperatures and widespread snow cover.

During the month of December drought classification continued improving over north Idaho and Montana west of the Continental Divide. East of the Continental Divide no changes were observed. North Idaho has seen decreased coverage of extreme drought and is covered mostly by moderate to severe drought. Western Montana is reporting abnormally dry to moderate drought

conditions. North central Montana continues to report a mix of severe to extreme drought, but southern Montana and North Dakota continue to report no drought.

Above normal precipitation occurred in December across the NRGA with minor exceptions in north central Montana immediately in the lee of the Rockies and over southeast North Dakota. Temperatures were above normal across the western NRGA with north Idaho and the western half of Montana reporting temperatures 7 to 12 degrees above normal. North Dakota and portions of northeast Montana posted temperatures 3 to 5 degrees below normal.

There was a period of fire activity associated with a multi-day wind event amid mild temperatures December 16-19, which quickly eroded snow cover and caused some rangeland fire activity. No fires reached large fire criteria, but the resulting fires totaled 75 acres burned.

Long range forecasts for January through March support above normal precipitation is likely to continue with near normal temperatures for the southern half of Montana and north Idaho but below normal temperatures for northern Montana and North Dakota. These trends combined with improving drought categories support normal significant fire potential, which is climatologically low for this outlook period.

Great Basin

Normal significant fire potential is expected throughout the Great Basin through April as this is normally the coolest and most moist time of year for most areas. The typical increase in wildfire activity during the early spring dormant season, before green-up, could be exacerbated in southern areas in March and April if the current weather pattern persists, but confidence is low that far out.

Southern and eastern areas have been considerably drier than normal this late fall and winter, with large areas of moderate to severe drought and snowpack well below normal. Across the mountains of Idaho and Western Wyoming precipitation and snowpack are closer to normal, although the snowpack has not extended down to middle elevations yet as it normally does most winters.

As December closes, 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, including a few near record dryness, for the time of year.

Over the next four months, near normal to wetter than normal conditions are expected for northern areas while continued drier and warmer than normal conditions will persist for the southern half of the Great Basin. While this pattern could portend above normal wildfire activity in the late winter or early spring for southern areas, at this time all areas are forecast to experience normal significant fire potential for the January through April outlook period.

Southwest

As of late December, the US Drought Monitor indicated widespread areas of persistent severe to extreme 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 worsen through spring, with warmer and drier than normal conditions expected.

Precipitation in December was much below normal areawide except for a few areas closer to normal in far western Arizona and central New Mexico. The Climate Prediction Center (CPC)

forecasts La Niña conditions to persist this winter, therefore, precipitation is expected to remain below normal through early spring.

Temperatures in December averaged 6-12 degrees above normal across most of the region, marking a historically very warm month as many stations across the Southwest recorded their warmest December on record. The CPC outlook for January calls for above normal temperatures to continue across the region, especially over southern New Mexico. This trend is expected to continue through spring.

Despite warmer and drier conditions, fire activity was minimal during the month of December, as is typical for this time of year. The CPC outlooks call for the warmer and drier than normal conditions to persist through spring, which may allow for a slight increase in fire activity as those impacts accrue. Nonetheless, significant fire activity generally should remain low areawide, as is normal for the winter months. Fire potential is expected to increase to above normal across eastern New Mexico in February and March due to the abundant grass crop, the forecasted dry winter weather, and the increase in wind events typical of early spring.

Rocky Mountain

Through December, the Rocky Mountain Area (RMA) remained under persistent high pressure bringing unusual warmth, scant precipitation, and frequent strong winds. Colorado and Wyoming were notably warmer than normal, while many lower elevations received less than half of typical precipitation amounts, leaving drought largely unchanged. Most wildfire activity was during periods of increased winds. La Niña is expected to persist into March, favoring occasional wind episodes; as a result, the Front Range of Colorado will see brief two- to three-day windows of above normal fire potential in January and February, with increasing chances in southeastern Colorado and western Kansas by late winter. Otherwise, near normal potential for significant fires is forecast across the rest of the RMA.

The RMA sat predominately on the edge of a strong ridge through December, yielding widespread warmth and limited precipitation. Colorado and Wyoming averaged 5-10 degrees above normal, with pockets of record heat. Meanwhile western Nebraska, Kansas, and the Black Hills ran 1-3 degrees above normal, and the eastern central Plains were slightly below normal. The blocking high pressure feature diverted most storm systems around the region, though western Wyoming, the Bighorn Mountains, and parts of South Dakota saw several systems skirting the ridge. Lower elevations received less than half of typical precipitation for the month. Wind events became more frequent in Wyoming and Colorado, occasionally producing gusts over 100 mph. With recent dryness and above average temperatures, relative humidity frequently fell into the teens and 20s. Drought status was largely unchanged, with minor improvement in western Wyoming and slight expansion along the Northern Colorado Front Range into southeastern Wyoming.

Warm, dry conditions continue to dry already dormant fuels. Moisture content in mid-sized 100-hour dead woody fuels is below normal for this time of year but still above historical minimums. During periods of stronger winds and already elevated background fire danger from dry conditions, the Burning Index, which is indicative of the potential for fires to grow rapidly, neared historical maximums for December.

Recent fire activity was concentrated in the mid-month wind events. Even with those significant winds, about 80% of fires were contained at three acres or less and within one operational period. Incidents exceeding three acres, including one just over 10,000 acres, were controlled within one to two operational periods once winds eased. Aggressive mitigation efforts, including de-energizing parts of the electrical power grid, increased public messaging, and school closures along the Front Range were key to averting disastrous outcomes despite the winds and largely receptive fuels.

La Niña is expected to persist through March while gradually weakening. A typical La Niña pattern for the RMA favors above normal precipitation in Wyoming, drier conditions in southern Colorado, and near average elsewhere. Temperatures tend to run warmer than normal in southern Colorado and near average across most of the area, with Wyoming and South Dakota sometimes trending a little colder. Springtime often features more frequent wind episodes under La Niña.

With low- to mid-elevation fuels largely snow-free and the pattern favoring increased winds rather than expanding snow cover, the Colorado Front Range is expected to experience above normal significant fire potential in January and February. This will occur in brief windows that may last two or three days. From February into March, as Southern Plains temperatures rise and winds typically strengthen while fuels remain dormant, southeastern Colorado and western Kansas are likely to see increasing chances for wildfires to arise, similar to recent years. Otherwise, significant fire potential is expected to remain near normal across the remainder of the RMA.

Eastern Area

Normal significant fire potential is forecast for the Eastern Area through April. Though there are some areas that are still a little drier than normal, such as Missouri, the overall outlook for the winter months is for minimal fire activity except in Missouri. A large fire or two may emerge in southern Missouri in the next two months, which is normal.

Most of the Eastern Area received near normal precipitation for December, although a few areas remained drier than normal in December, particularly southern Missouri, the Ohio Valley, and portions of the Upper Midwest. Despite the drier trend in the Upper Midwest, snow cover is widespread, which is normal. Snow also covers much of the Great Lakes into the Northeast. Only the southern tier of the Eastern Area is devoid of snow at the end of December.

The US Drought Monitor indicates that drought persists across much of the Eastern Area, including much of the Midwest, Missouri, Mid-Atlantic, and the Northeast. However, drought has changed little over the past month, with small areas of degradation in Missouri and the Mid-Atlantic, and small improvements in the Northeast. Small areas of extreme drought persist along a line from eastern Illinois through northern Indiana into northwestern Ohio.

December temperatures were below normal for most of the Eastern Area except for Missouri, which was slightly above normal. The Northeast and coastal Mid-Atlantic were very cold the past month, with temperatures averaging 5-10°F below normal for December.

Recent fire activity has been minimal overall the past month, with most in southern Missouri and a few small fires in southern Pennsylvania and coastal New England. The largest fire was a 214-acre fire in southern Missouri southwest of Rolla.

Overall temperatures forecast by the Climate Prediction Center (CPC) are likely to be above normal in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic over the winter. Normal temperatures are likely in the Big Rivers, while below normal temperatures are forecast for much of the Upper Midwest. Precipitation is expected to be normal for most of the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic, with an above normal signal for much of the Great Lakes and into the Big Rivers.

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 will occasionally have days of above normal fire activity in some areas, focused on the southern tier.

Normal significant fire potential is forecast for the next four months for the Eastern Area as most areas traditionally have little to no fire activity over the winter, with an increasing trend during March and April as the spring fire season commences. Areas of long-term or intensified drought in southern Missouri may present more of an issue during the outlook period if the drought intensifies. However, it is expected that enough precipitation will occur to keep fire potential within seasonal norms. Farther north, snow cover will limit activity through February, with a seasonal increase in activity expected in March and April. Normal potential is expected for those two months across the rest of the Eastern Area. However, if drought were to emerge or intensify, it may result in drier fine fuels during the peak of spring fire season, which would result in a more active spring season.

Southern Area

The overarching theme for the 2026 dormant season and transition to spring is one of outsized risk across the Southern Area. Aside from temporary drought relief for the coastal Southeast early in December, underlying dryness has been building in much of the region through late fall and early winter. Worsening drought heading into a season influenced by La Niña, broad areas of above normal to even exceptional fuel loading in the Plains, along with a multitude of fuel concerns in the Southeast and southern Appalachians continue to be the drivers of risk until green-up is in full swing.

The outlook period will at least initially be dominated by influences from La Niña, but week-to-week changes in weather that could alter the fire environment at least temporarily are much less clear. Warm temperatures and below average rainfall will be most likely for the Southeast coastal plain and Piedmont, extending west along the Gulf Coast into Texas and at least western portions of Oklahoma. Heavy, wet snow events in the grass-dominant Plains could still alter the fuelscape the next few months, while a temporarily suppressed storm track similar to what occurred in early December could bring another round of beneficial rain to the coastal Southeast. Neither of these outcomes appears especially likely, and seasonal conditions are still strongly favored to be warm and dry. Rainfall patterns later in March and April will be dependent on how quickly La Niña's influence wanes.

Large areas of the Mississippi Valley into the Southeast are experiencing rainfall deficits since summer on the order of 5-15 inches, resulting in deep layer soil moisture below the 10th percentile, per NASA's Short-term Prediction Research and Transition Center (SPoRT). If this moisture is not replenished prior to lengthening days and warmer temperatures, live fuel moisture is likely to be critically low throughout areas dominated by southern rough and pine forests. Mostly below average rainfall in December and expectations for a drier and warmer than average January will result in expanding and intensifying drought along the Gulf Coast and as far north as the southern Appalachian states. Drought also remains extensive in southern and central Texas and portions of Oklahoma, with a worsening trend most likely across Texas into western Oklahoma the next few months.

Of greatest concern in the Southern Plains is widespread above normal grass loading, likely the most prolific since at least the 2021-2022 dormant season. July's historic flooding in central Texas amid a wet growing season resulted in exceptional grass loads there, per surveys conducted by the Texas A&M Forest Service. Oklahoma Forestry Services reports exceptional grass loading in northwestern parts of their state, including the eastern Oklahoma panhandle. In these areas of above normal to exceptional grass loading, significant wildfires can arise under conditions that normally would not be particularly problematic, such as less intense fire weather and fuel dryness. Further exacerbating the elevated potential for significant fire events at lower trigger thresholds, the ongoing La Niña will likely result in a heightened risk and frequency of extreme fire weather episodes characterized by strong winds, especially by late February into March. Risks later in spring will be dependent on grazing and the timing of green-up, and confidence is much lower by April. Some adjustments from the previous outlook were considered across South Texas, which

is carrying extensive long-term drought and generally near normal fuel loads. Coastal counties are showing near to above average grass loads, however.

Above normal significant fire potential in January was expanded from the previous outlook across the Southeast, based on December's dryness and a pattern that at least early in the month may lead to dry cold fronts and periods of fire-effective weather. Fuel loads from 2023's drought, beetle infestations and storm damage will enhance the risk for significant fires, but further-cured debris from Helene is likely to contribute to above normal significant fire potential from northern Florida to the southern Appalachians until green-up sets in and soil moisture is replenished. The period from mid-February into March could be especially active, as model guidance and prior analogs to this year's expected transition from La Niña to neutral conditions suggest enhanced risks for critical fire weather in the Southeast. Abnormally dry coastal areas will take multiple, widespread soaking rain events to bring soil moisture and water levels back to normal, something that may not occur on a broad scale until late spring or early summer. Above normal significant fire potential will thus persist into at least April in the coastal pocosins and swamplands from the Carolinas to South Florida, potentially at the start of a wetter period that will see enhanced risks for lightning ignitions.

The Caribbean islands, including Puerto Rico, have entered a more active weather pattern recently, but abnormal dryness continues in the region. Model guidance is insistent on a wetter than normal few months ahead, but La Niña climatology tends to favor a drier signal there until the rainy season begins in late spring. This leads to somewhat lower confidence overall, but given ongoing rainfall deficits, above normal significant fire potential is maintained for March, during the typical height of their fire season.

Although the expected wintertime storm track has yet to materialize in the Mississippi Valley, confidence is moderate to high in a stormy late winter and spring in the region. Below normal significant fire potential is forecast for February in Arkansas, western Tennessee and Kentucky, which is climatologically favored to be wet during and just after La Niña. Model support for above normal rainfall through the outlook period could maintain lower risks for wildland fire and limit opportunities for prescribed fire into spring, as well.

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