North American Seasonal Fire Assessment and Outlook

National Interagency Fire Center ● Natural Resources Canada ● Servicio Meteorológico Nacional
United States Canada Mexico

Outlook Period March through May 2026
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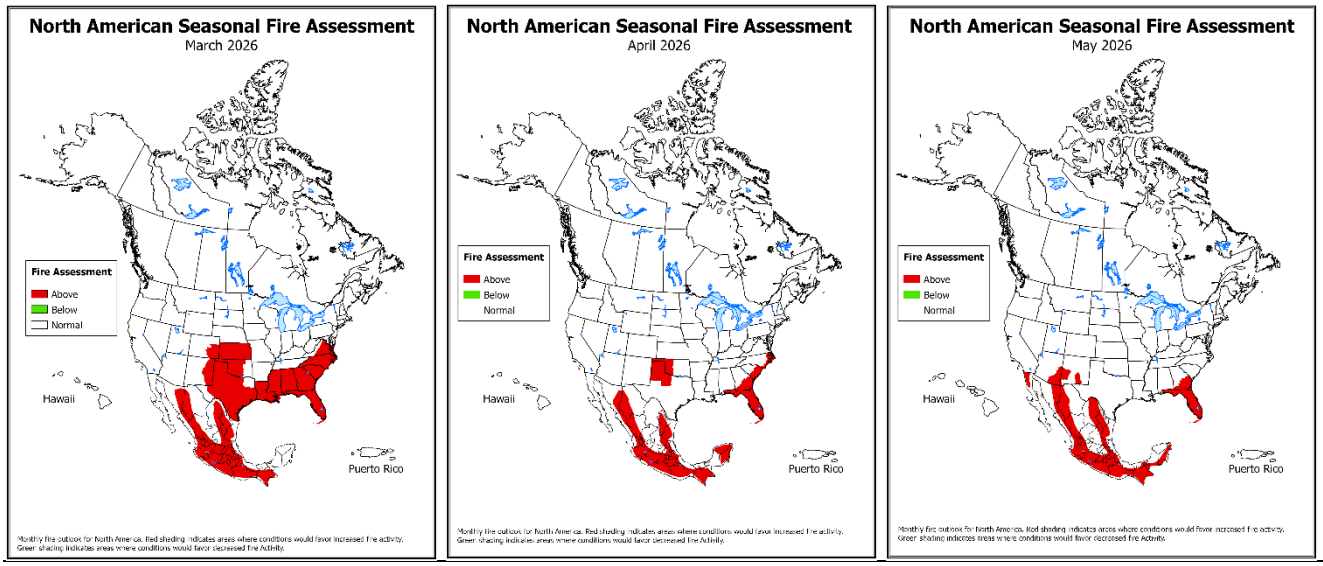
Executive Summary

During February, the effects of a weakened La Niña and a mundane Madden-Julian Oscillation were felt across Canada. The polar front stayed mostly north of major population centers and resulted in generally warmer than normal conditions for the southern half of the country. Conversely, northern Canada had a colder than normal February. There were several notable weather events from coast to coast, however the Atlantic coast took the brunt of the impact with several storms bringing ample snow to the region. Nearly continual weather systems impacted Newfoundland bringing a record for monthly snowfall to St. Johns airport. Additionally, Pacific weather systems impacting the north coast of British Columbia brought a wet month to the Yukon



Monthly fire outlook for North America for March 2026 (left), April 2026 (middle), and May 2026 (right). Red shading indicates areas where conditions would favor increased fire activity. Green shading indicates areas where conditions would favor decreased fire activity. *Click on each image to see larger versions.*

In the Yukon, temperatures were generally cooler than normal, with northern regions close to 6C below normal. Cold anomalies extended into the Northwest Territories and western Nunavut. Further south, warmer than normal temperatures extended over eastern British Columbia, the southern prairies, into northern Ontario. The warmest of these regions was southwestern Saskatchewan and southeast Alberta, with temperatures 6C above normal. During the first half of February, both Lethbridge and Bow Island reached 20.6C, the warmest February temperature ever recorded in Alberta. Conversely, during a brief cold spell in northern Quebec, Kuujjuaq set an all-time minimum temperature at -40.8C on February 24. The warmest region in Canada during February was over east central Newfoundland, where Happy Valley-Goose Bay was 7.8C warmer than normal and Makkovik had its warmest February on record. Temperatures in the Maritimes were not quite so warm, and it is suspected that frequent cloud cover drove near-normal daytime temperatures and slightly warmer than average nighttime temperatures, resulting in a slight warm anomaly at months end.

February's precipitation varied widely across Canada, at both national and provincial scales. British Columbia had stark differences between precipitation amounts in the south and north. In the northern half of the province, Prince Rupert received nearly double its normal precipitation for the month. Conversely, Vancouver recorded only a trace amount of snow in February for first time in over 40 years, while areas in southern British Columbia's mountains and inland valleys saw less than half of normal precipitation. A large swath of western Yukon Territory saw nearly triple its normal February precipitation, while Dawson recorded its second wettest February on record. The warmth observed in Alberta and southern Saskatchewan brought continued melting of the snowpack. However, later in the month, several storms brought some reprieve. The northern prairies had a wet month, with areas from east-central Alberta through central Saskatchewan to Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba receiving 200-300% of their normal February precipitation. Northwestern Ontario had a wetter than normal month in response to weather systems tracking across the prairies. Southern Ontario was drier than normal, and most precipitation came from a single event on February 17, when Collingwood set a record with 22.8mm. Additionally, while it was noted that southern Ontario had a drier than normal month, several stations had record high amounts for snow on ground measurements from January snowfall. While snow cover remained relatively stable across Quebec in February, most of the province saw below normal precipitation, including Montreal, where just 0.2mm was recorded. Farther east, the Magdalen Islands only received one twelfth of their usual precipitation.

The dry trend extended into Atlantic Canada, where total precipitation was generally below normal but some amounts fell as snow, exceeding normal amounts. For example, February's total precipitation in parts of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia ranged from just 14-27% of normal, but the storms delivered good amounts of snow, including nearly double the normal February snowfall in parts of Nova Scotia. While above normal, snow amounts in New Brunswick were not enough to reverse dry conditions there. Like the Maritime provinces, Newfoundland and Labrador saw normal to above normal snow amounts, with parts of southeast Newfoundland receiving up to 300% of normal for the month. Western Labrador and southern Newfoundland saw just 25% of their normal total precipitation. Southeast Labrador and northeastern Newfoundland fared better, receiving slightly more than normal precipitation for February.

As is typical for this time of year, wildfire activity remained low in Canada in February, and normal significant fire potential is expected to continue nationwide through May.

Fire activity remained at low levels across the U.S. in February and early March, with gradual increase in activity in the latter half of February into early March, mainly in the Southern and Rocky Mountain Areas. February precipitation was below normal across most of the U.S., with well below normal precipitation observed across portions of the Midwest, Southwest, South Texas, and Florida. Precipitation was slightly above normal from central California northward into Oregon and the Columbia Basin, with small areas of above normal precipitation from North Dakota eastward into Upper Michigan, northern Arizona, southeast Colorado, and northwest Kansas.

Climate Prediction Center and Predictive Services outlooks issued in late February forecast temperatures are likely to be above normal across the southern half of the contiguous U.S., while the Upper Midwest is likely to be below normal. Precipitation is expected to be below normal for the southwest quarter of the country, with above normal precipitation most likely in the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley. No category dominates in Alaska, although portions of the southeast are likely to be cooler and drier than normal while the northwest fringe is likely to be warmer and wetter than normal.

The northern half of the U.S. is forecast to have normal significant fire potential through the period, indicating a very gradual increase in activity. However, much of the Southern Area will have above normal fire potential in March, decreasing to South Georgia and Florida by May. Above normal potential is also forecast in portions of the Southwest in May.

Wildfire activity continues its seasonal rise across Mexico. As of the beginning of March, 1,238 forest fires have been recorded, affecting an area of 57,576 hectares so far this year. Activity has been greatest in the central, western, northern, northeastern, and southeastern regions, which will reach

relative peaks in March and April due to the deterioration of environmental conditions. In contrast, May is when the wildfire season begins in northern Baja California.

Recent meteorological conditions have had a palliative effect on drought across Mexico. Between December 2025 and January 2026, national precipitation was above average. However, in February, the national average monthly precipitation was below the mean, meaning the moisture contribution to the soil was limited. Average temperatures nationwide remained above normal the past three months. If the forecast for below normal precipitation and above normal temperatures continues for the months of March and April, it could impact the intensity of forest fires.

Considering these factors and current climatological analyses, warm and dry conditions are anticipated for the March-April period, with wet conditions expected in May. However, the occurrence of extreme dry or wet events cannot be ruled out and are difficult to forecast this far in advance. The phase and trends of the Pacific Decadal Oscillation and the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) generate less uncertainty in the precipitation and temperature forecasts. Their influence due to the weak La Niña or ENSO-neutral state could strengthen dry and warm conditions across Mexico the next two months.

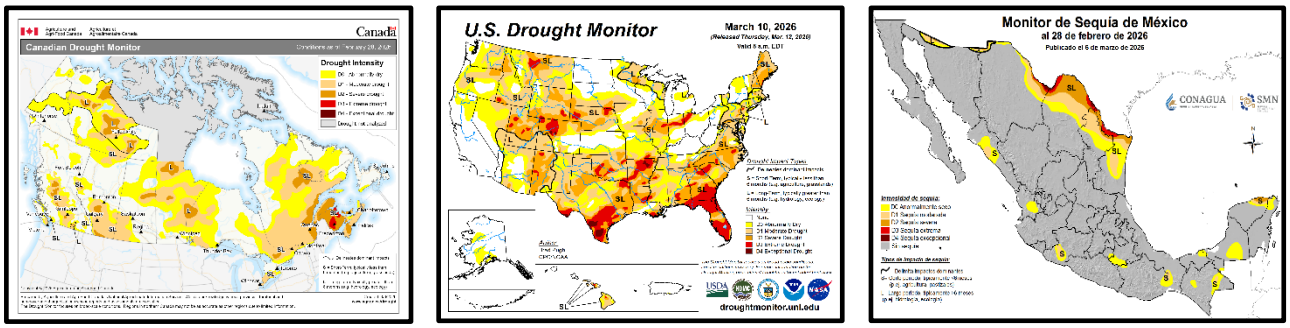
Above normal significant fire potential is forecast for much of Mexico from March through May. For March, the area of above normal potential extends nearly the full length of the country, from the Chiapas Highlands through nearly all portions of the Sierra Madre, excluding parts of the Central Plateau and northern plains. Elevated potential will persist for April, adding much of the Yucatán Peninsula too. For May, the state of Yucatán reverts to normal, but the area of above normal potential extends even farther northward in the western and eastern Sierra Madre to the U.S. border and adds part of Baja California as well as the remaining areas along Mexico's southern border.

Critical Factors

The critical factors influencing significant fire potential for this outlook period are global climate patterns related to sea surface temperatures, particularly in the Pacific Ocean, and large scale, longer-term soil moisture deficits:

El Niño-Southern Oscillation and Other Climate Teleconnections:

The El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) remains in a weak La Niña state, but sea surface temperatures (SSTs) continue to warm, with abundant warming showing up below the surface. The Climate Prediction Center forecasts La Niña to transition to ENSO-neutral conditions in the next month, with ENSO-neutral conditions expected to persist through spring. There is an increasing possibility of El Niño developing this summer. The negative phase of the Pacific Decadal Oscillation (PDO) continues to weaken, with the negative phase the weakest it has been in the past several years and it is likely to have less impact on this forecast than prior years. The Madden-Julian Oscillation (MJO) is weak and is not expected to be a significant player in the outlook. The transition from La Niña to ENSO-neutral conditions will be the main driver of this outlook.



Left: Canadian Drought Monitor from *Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.* **Middle:** United States Drought Monitor. **Right:** Mexican Drought Monitor from *CONAGUA-Servicio Meteorológico Nacional.*

Drought:

Although winter is not the best time of year for drought mitigation in continental regions of Canada, the nation underwent substantial improvement during February, leaving 53% of the nation in some state of dryness (abnormally dry through extreme drought) by the end of the month. Large swaths of the country showed one- or two-class reductions in drought. Despite this improvement, drought intensification or inception occurred in portions of the central Northwest Territories north of Yellowknife, in southern British Columbia and Alberta, and in patches of eastern Ontario, southern Quebec, and the Atlantic Provinces. In southern parts of western Canada, warm temperatures contributed to snow loss and increased evaporation, contributing to drying of the landscape. Except for Yukon (which does have abnormally dry areas), all regions of Canada currently have areas of moderate drought or a higher category. Drought intensity is highest in New Brunswick, with widespread severe drought and pockets of extreme to exceptional drought. Elsewhere in eastern Canada, much of the area is classified as abnormally dry to moderate drought, with smaller areas of severe drought in Nova Scotia, Quebec, and Newfoundland/Labrador. Aside from a drought-free zone from Lake Superior to the James Bay region of Hudson Bay, central Canada features large abnormally dry areas with smaller portions of moderate to severe drought interspersed. In the west, large areas of moderate and severe drought are present in central British Columbia southward to the U.S. border, the southern third of Alberta, and southwest Saskatchawan, plus smaller areas in southern coastal British Columbia and the Peace River region of west-central Alberta.

Precipitation was below normal across most of the U.S. for February, despite heavy snowfall in some areas. Significant snow fell across portions of the East Coast, with heavy snow across North Carolina that ended February 1, and a strong Nor'easter that brought very heavy snow to the coastal Mid-Atlantic and southern New England February 22-23. Out West, deficient snowpack continues to be a major concern, as almost all basins have well below normal snow water equivalent. Storms in the Cascades, Sierra, and Rockies in February and early March provided minimal and only short-term improvement, with new snow accumulations generally limited to high elevation areas, while rain further eroded snowpack at mid-elevation sites. Total precipitation amounts less than 25% of normal were observed in February across portions of north-central Montana, from South Dakota southeast to northern Missouri and Illinois, the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles, southeast New Mexico, South Texas, and South Florida. Central California north into Oregon, the Columbia Basin and Snake River Plain received near to above normal precipitation. Otherwise, above normal precipitation was limited to North Dakota eastward into Upper Michigan and small portions of central Montana, northern Arizona, southeast Colorado, and Kansas. Precipitation in Alaska was mostly above normal, as was Hawai'i precipitation. In early March, precipitation has been above normal for much of the eastern half of Texas to the Mississippi and Ohio Valleys, as well as portions of the Great Lakes and Northeast. Precipitation has started March below normal in much of the Southwest, southern High Plains, northern Plains, and southeast Atlantic coast.

Overall drought increased across the U.S. during February into early March with nearly 54% of the country in drought as of March 10. Drought intensified in much of Montana and Wyoming, with drought development and/or intensification into portions of northern California, Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado. Much of the central and southern Plains into the Southeast also observed an increase in drought during the month, as well as portions of Iowa and northern Illinois. Drought improvement occurred in early March focused on the Mid-Mississippi and Lower Ohio Valleys. Areas of extreme drought have expanded across the U.S. and can now be found in 22 states. The most extensive extreme drought is in South Texas, Florida, South Georgia, and northern Arkansas. Small areas of exceptional drought exist in northern Arkansas, central Colorado, the Big Bend, and South Texas. Drought persists across much of the southern Hawai'ian Islands, but with some improvement over the past month.

During the second half of February, the arrival of three cold fronts in Mexico, which were accompanied by northerly winds and areas of low-pressure, resulted in above-average rainfall, primarily in the central, southern, and eastern regions, as well as the Yucatán Peninsula. Scattered showers were also recorded in northern Mexico. Consequently, abnormally dry conditions decreased slightly in Chihuahua

and southern Chiapas. Conversely, areas experiencing moderate to extreme drought increased in the northern regions of Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas. Similarly, isolated pockets of moderate drought and abnormally dry conditions were observed in western and southern Mexico. As of February 28, the nationwide percentage of area experiencing moderate to exceptional drought stood at 7.4%, representing a slight increase of 0.5% compared to February 15.

Fire Season Status:

Canada had no significant wildfires during the month of February though pile burning, and other hazard reduction burns continued across Canada. Southern Alberta and southern interior British Columbia have had significant snow-free areas and exposed grasslands and forested areas, which allowed an early start to Fire Weather Index calculations. Although rain or snow has occasionally fallen in these regions, temperatures sprang back quickly, allowing calculations to continue, but the affected area has not recently expanded. Additional areas may start calculations later in March as temperatures start to climb as spring emerges.

In the U.S., fire activity generally remained at low levels in most areas during February and early March, with modest increases in activity that included relatively short duration but significant events the latter half of February into March, primarily in Southern Area but also including parts of Northern Rockies, Rocky Mountain, Southwest, and Eastern Areas. The most notable increase in activity occurred February 17 due to a fire outbreak on the central and southern Plains. Large wind-driven fires emerged across New Mexico, Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas, including the Ranger Road fire that burned over 280,000 acres across Oklahoma and Kansas, but these fires burned primarily in cured fine fuels and were quickly contained once the winds subsided. Other wind events produced large fires in southern Missouri February 24, with a strong downslope wind event in central Montana February 26 resulting in numerous fires. Finally, a widespread strong wind event March 12 with wind gusts to 90 mph on the central Plains resulted in a fire outbreak focused on South Dakota and Nebraska.

Despite those short periods of increased activity, the U.S. National Preparedness Level remained at one (on a scale of 1-5) due to the low overall level of activity nationally and good availability of resources. As of March 13, 211,487 hectares (522,585 acres) have burned across the country, which is 118% of the previous 10-year average. So far this year 11,339 fires have been reported, which is well above the 10-year average, at 166%.

Year-to-date in Mexico, 1,328 wildfires have been recorded across 30 federal entities, covering a total area of 57,576 hectares. Of this affected area, 98% burned in grass and brush, while only 2% affected timber. Of the total 1,328 wildfires, 384 incidents (about 31%), occurred in fire-sensitive ecosystems. These incidents burned 30,927 hectares, which is equivalent to 54% of the total burned area. The states with the highest number of wildfires were the State of Mexico, Jalisco, Mexico City, Michoacán, Puebla, Morelos, Oaxaca, Hidalgo, Chiapas, and Tlaxcala. These states accounted for about 77% of the total fires. The states with the largest burned areas were San Luis Potosí, Oaxaca, Zacatecas, Guerrero, Chiapas, Jalisco, Hidalgo, the State of Mexico, Puebla, and Aguascalientes, which together represent 89% of the total burned area.

Canada Discussion

March/April/May: A Modoki-like La Niña in early March appears to be fading fast, with a warm plume of ocean water emanating from the west coast of South America, and close to normal ocean temperatures in the mid-Pacific. This appears to be leading into a neutral El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) event that will likely persist through spring and provide variable weather in western Canada, at minimum.

March snow levels are significant across much of Canada, although bare ground has prevailed in lower elevations of southern British Columbia and Alberta. Periodic snow or rain has helped prevent much

fire, and this pattern appears to continue through the remainder of March, although precipitation appears to be forced further north past mid-month as ridging returns to western Canada. Precipitation amounts will likely remain light in extreme northern regions under the constant influence of continental Arctic air, which will maintain sub-zero temperatures. Significant fire potential, which remains low for this time of year, is forecast for all areas.

For April, neutral ENSO conditions will likely result in continued variable weather conditions, at least in western Canada. Some hints of cool air lingering in northwest Canada could delay onset of fire in those regions as snow cover may remain, as in northern parts of the provinces. Temperatures may be above normal in southern British Columbia and Alberta, but precipitation is expected to be normal to above normal in parts of these regions. Coastal areas may be drier than normal, but fire is usually not prevalent at this time of year, as rainfall begins to taper off from higher winter levels. Like March, normal (low) significant fire potential is anticipated throughout Canada.

May is forecast to be warm in most of Canada, but cool air may remain in northern parts of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario, and into the Territories north of these provinces. A lesser chance of similar conditions exists in northern Alberta and the western Northwest Territories. Precipitation levels are expected to be normal to above normal in northeastern British Columbia, Alberta, and western Saskatchewan, the part of western Canada that normally experiences significant May. At this time, we do not anticipate above normal fire levels in May.

United States Discussion

March/April/May: Climate Prediction Center and Predictive Services outlooks issued in late January forecast a pattern indicative of a weakening La Niña and transition to ENSO-neutral conditions. Temperatures are likely to be above normal across the southern half of the country, although an extreme heat wave is looking likely for the latter half of March across the southwestern quarter of the U.S. Temperatures are likely to be below normal across portions of the Upper Midwest, focused more toward March. Precipitation is likely to be above normal for the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley, but below normal for much of the southwestern U.S., with spring typically the driest season of the year for Arizona and New Mexico.

Normal significant fire potential is forecast for the northern half of the U.S. into June. For the southern half of the country, a large area of above normal significant fire potential is forecast in March from the southern Rockies into the southern Plains and much of the Southeast, highlighting areas having high concentrations of cured and dormant fuels, ongoing drought, and forecasted precipitation deficits where wildfire activity will increase, particularly during windy conditions, until the intermix of seasonally greening fuels is sufficient to reduce fire danger and lessen fire growth potential. In April, most of these areas will return to normal except for portions of North Texas and western Oklahoma, which have above normal fine fuel loading and are expected to remain drier than normal, plus parts of the southeast Atlantic Coast and Florida, where persisting drought is a concern. For May, above normal significant fire potential will continue in South Georgia and Florida, with above normal potential added for southeast Arizona and the White, Gila, and Sacramento Mountains of the Southwest, which includes areas of abnormally low snowpack and widespread tree mortality.

Mexico Discussion

March/April/May: Above average rainfall is forecast in March for Baja California, Campeche, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, and Yucatán, while the remainder of the country is expected to receive below-average precipitation. Regarding temperature, above average temperatures are anticipated across most of Mexico. However, below average temperatures may occur in localized areas of Baja California, Chihuahua, Durango, Jalisco, Colima, Nayarit, Guanajuato, Michoacán, the State of Mexico, Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Quintana Roo.

In April, above average rainfall is forecast for Hidalgo, Querétaro, Quintana Roo, San Luis Potosí, Tamaulipas, and Veracruz. In contrast, below average precipitation is expected across the remainder of the country. As for temperatures, above average values are expected for most of the nation. However, localized areas may experience temperatures below normal, including parts of the Baja California Peninsula, Sonora, Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Durango, Nayarit, Jalisco, Colima, Guanajuato, Michoacán, the State of Mexico, Puebla, Oaxaca, Veracruz, Chiapas, and Quintana Roo.

Above average rainfall is forecast in May for Campeche, Chiapas, Mexico City, Coahuila, Durango, Hidalgo, the State of Mexico, Nuevo León, Puebla, Querétaro, San Luis Potosí, Sinaloa, Tabasco, Tamaulipas, Tlaxcala, Veracruz, and Zacatecas. In contrast, below average precipitation is expected across the remainder of the country. Regarding temperatures, above average values are projected for most of the national territory. Exceptions include localized areas within the Baja California Peninsula, Sonora, Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Durango, Nayarit, Jalisco, Colima, Guanajuato, Michoacán, the State of Mexico, Tamaulipas, Puebla, Oaxaca, and Quintana Roo, where temperatures are expected to be below normal.

Considering current temperature and precipitation patterns, drought, and climatological forecasts, wildfire activity is expected to gradually increase across most of Mexico during the March through May period, reaching relative peaks in March and April. This progression aligns with the typical seasonal nature of forest fires for this time of year. While this spring is anticipated to be slightly cooler than average due to recent rainfall, which has bolstered soil moisture, the climate outlook still indicates dry conditions throughout March and April, followed by warmer trends.

The regions with the highest potential for wildfire activity during the period are the Sierra Madre Occidental, Sierra Madre Oriental, much of southern Mexico, and portions of the Yucatán and Baja Peninsulas. These risks are driven by the ongoing dry season, further modulated by the spring transition. As environmental conditions gradually deteriorate, wildfire activity is expected to escalate, peaking during March and April across the central, western, northern, northeastern, and southeastern regions of the country, before initiating in the Baja California Peninsula in May.

Additional Information

Additional and supplemental information for this outlook can be obtained at:

United States:
National Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook
https://www.nifc.gov/nicc-files/predictive/outlooks/monthly_seasonal_outlook.pdf

Canada:
Canadian Wildland Fire Information System
http://cwfis.cfs.nrcan.gc.ca/home

Mexico:
Servicio Meteorológico Nacional
https://smn.conagua.gob.mx/es/observando-el-tiempo/monitoreo-atmosferico-ambiental

Outlook Objective

The North American Seasonal Fire Assessment and Outlook is a general discussion of conditions that will affect the occurrence of wildland fires across Canada, the United States, and Mexico. Wildland fire is a natural part of many ecosystems across North America. This document provides a broad assessment of those factors that will contribute to an increase or decrease of seasonal fire activity. The objective is to assist wildland fire managers in preparing for the potential variations in a typical fire season. It is not intended as a prediction of where and when wildland fires will occur nor is it intended to suggest any area is safe from the hazards of wildfire.

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