Fuels and Fire Behavior Advisory

Southeastern United States

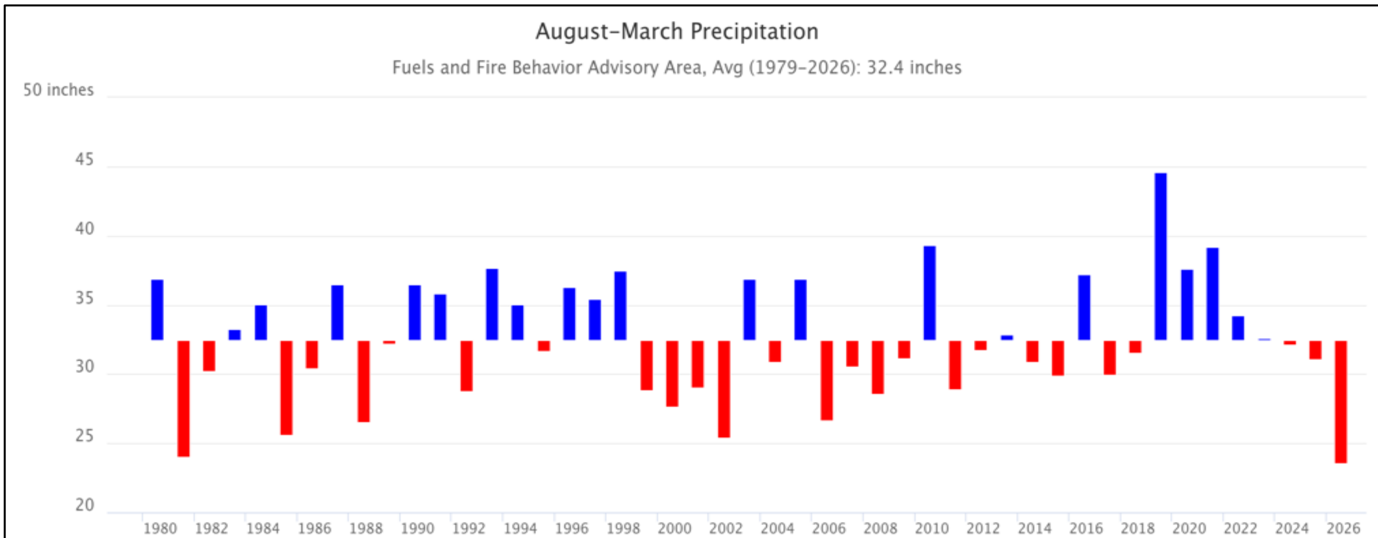
Date Advisory Effective – April 16, 2026

Subject: Persistent dry weather and rapidly intensifying drought are resulting in historically dry fuels from the southern Appalachians and adjacent areas into the coastal Southeast.

Discussion: Unusual long-term drought began in the advisory area after minimal tropical activity affected the region in 2025. A dry fall, winter and spring followed, cementing conditions in the fire environment that are becoming increasingly impactful. Hardwood leaf-out and green-up are progressing along normal timelines, but extremely low soil moisture, dry surface fuels, low water levels in coastal areas and persistent low humidity are all contributing to unusual fire activity. Dry weather will persist in the short-term, followed by a pattern change in late April that may result in an increase in lightning-ignited fires across the Southeast, along with only temporary relief from the long-term drought.

Recent fire activity in the coastal plain of the Carolinas

Differences from Normal Conditions: Precipitation deficits since the 2025 hurricane season are in excess of 10" over most of the area and locally near two feet in the temperate rainforests of the southern Appalachians. Precipitation totals averaged over the advisory area from August to March were the lowest since at least 1979, and abnormally dry conditions have persisted into mid-April. This underlying drought has resulted in historically low stream flow and water levels for this time of year, in addition to extreme fire behavior and increased resistance to control in the coastal plain and Appalachians. Deep layer soil moisture percentiles from NASA-SPoRT below the 2nd percentile also suggest that regional ecosystems will continue to be stressed until meaningful replenishment occurs. A recent atmospheric drought has brought a sharp increase in fuel dryness, with most dead fuel moisture classes near historical lows and ERC-Y from the 97th to 100th percentile in the advisory area. Persistent dry air in the short term will result in some of the driest fuels experienced in the region in at least 20 years.



Precipitation amounts averaged over the Advisory area from August to March were the lowest since at least 1979, resulting in significant, widespread and unusually persistent drought. (Climate Toolbox Historical Climate Tracker)

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Concerns to Firefighters and the Public:

- Critical fire weather may occur with hot, dry and breezy days, dry frontal passages, downslope wind events, sea breezes and thunderstorms
- Typical fire weather thresholds may not apply when record high fire danger and record heat align – critical conditions may occur with RH 5% above and winds 5 mph below regional thresholds
- Do not be fooled by fuels that appear to be green – fire will spread readily under current conditions
- Green-up may temper fire intensity somewhat. If fuels are thoroughly shaded, probability of ignition will be less, and rates of spread will be lower. **THIS DOES NOT APPLY TO COASTAL FUELS THAT ARE TRANSITIONING FROM DORMANT TO GREEN!** Resinous fuels in coastal plain areas may be more volatile during this transition period – especially in droughty conditions where shrubs do not have adequate water to complete the green up process. These fuels should be treated with caution
- Expect most snags and heavy dead and down fuel to readily ignite, potentially consuming entirely
- Helene fuels will be much more available now than last spring or fall
- Ground and/or duff fire will likely be a long-term issue that can hinder fire control efforts
- Recent fires in mountain and Piedmont areas are displaying higher than expected resistance to control
- Recent fuel-driven fires in coastal plain areas have produced explosive fire behavior that may outpace control efforts, even with little or no wind - swamps or drainages may not provide reliable containment
- Wildfires and prescribed fires are “coming back to life” and escaping containment several weeks after fire spread was thought to be complete; mop-up efforts will be taxing until drought improves
- Careful consideration should be given to any planned prescribed fires during this time
- Members of the public should stay informed of fire activity near their location and should heed evacuation notices immediately! Do not fly drones near areas of fire suppression activity!

Area of Concern: southern Appalachians, Piedmont and coastal Southeast

Issued by: Southern Area Decision Support with state and federal partners