

Southwest Area Seasonal Outlook

February – May 2026

Weather Factors and Outlook:

Drought Conditions: As of late January, the US 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 Anomalies and Outlook: 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 Nina conditions will shift to ENSO-neutral later this winter. The CPC February outlook forecast was indicating below normal precipitation regionwide in February but backed off on that concept with the January 31st update. The latest update forecasts equal chances of above and below normal precipitation, and only chances for below normal precipitation in February across the far north. However, there is a likelihood that storms will bring periods of precipitation to offset the dryness in some areas, especially in the latter half of February. Therefore, it's looking more likely that more of the region will end February with above normal precipitation than below, especially in areas over the western two thirds of the region. CPC outlooks favor below normal precipitation regionwide from March through May. Predictive Services agrees mostly with this assessment, except for March, where moisture may linger over parts of the region.

Temperature Anomalies and Outlook: Temperatures in January averaged 3-6 degree above normal across most of the region, except for just below normal temperatures over eastern New Mexico. The CPC outlook for February calls for above normal temperatures to continue across much of the region, with greater likelihood of above normal temperatures March through May. Predictive Services agrees with this forecast overall. However, the likely scenario will be periods of above normal temperatures, followed by periods of below normal temperatures as areas of high pressure alternate with stronger low-pressure systems through at least February and March. This may average closer to 'normal' or just above normal for the 30-day period in February and possibly March before the greater likelihood of above normal temperatures takes hold.

Significant Fire Potential	Above Normal southeastern and eastern Arizona and south-central and southwest New Mexico, normal elsewhere. Despite warmer and drier conditions recently in many areas, fire activity was minimal during the month of January, as is typical for
-----------------------------------	--

	<p>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. However, Predictive Services has lower confidence in these outlooks and sees the potential for periods of wetter and cooler conditions to periodically move through the region especially the latter half to two thirds of February into March. So, this could lower fire potential west of the central mountains. The main concerns heading into late February, March and April will be the well above normal fine fuel loading over eastern New Mexico, as we enter the windy season. Above normal fire potential is possible in these areas later in February once the effects from late January snow and cold moderate. However, there are some question marks on if/what compaction the January snow caused in southeast New Mexico. Above normal fire potential will continue through March and may even linger or increase into April, prior to green-up, depending on the weather pattern and green-up timing. There is low confidence in the temperature and precipitation forecasts through 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 with persistent drought, especially if the warmer and drier forecast scenario occurs.</p>
Prescribed Fire Implications	<p>Prescribed burners should keep a close eye on the weather conditions and fire danger readings through the spring as periods of very warm and dry weather will occur at times through February and March. However, if this is offset with periods of wet and cooler weather, it may keep fire danger lower. Wind will be a factor, at times, especially in downslope prone areas and in areas where fuel loading is higher in eastern New Mexico.</p>
Miscellaneous	<p>Extended forecasts have been highly unreliable over the past year, so it's advisable to monitor shorter term fire potential forecasts.</p>

