

North Central U.S. Climate and Drought Summary and Outlook

January 15, 2026

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Research Asst. Professor (University of Montana)



Central Region Climate & Drought Outlook
Dr. Zachary Hoylman, Montana Climate Office
University of Montana
Missoula, MT - 1/15/2026

SUMMARY AND OUTLINE

- Recent Conditions

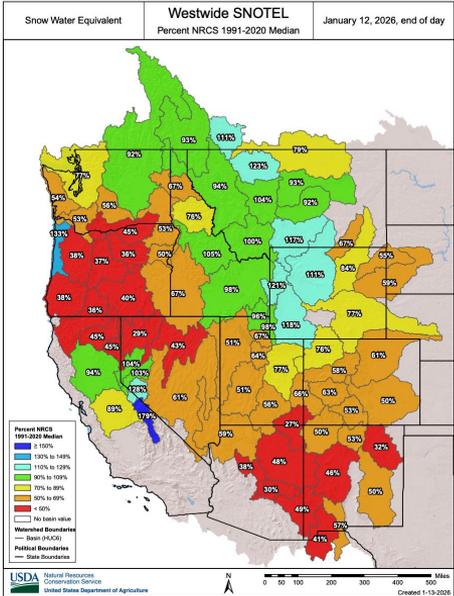
- 2025 Climate Recap
- 1-3 month & month-to-date precipitation / temperature
- Snow anomalies
- Soil Moisture
- Streamflow (current and forecast)
- Reservoirs
- Drought

- Impacts

- Wild Wind!
- Unconventional Snowpack

- Outlooks

- 8 day - 3 month precipitation and temperature
- ENSO Forecast
- Drought / Fire



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2025 Climate Recap

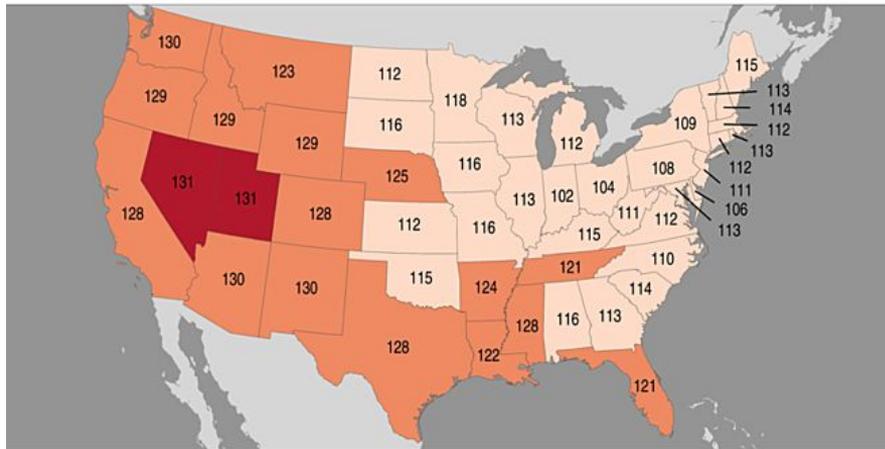


2025 TEMPERATURE AND PRECIPITATION

Above average in the UMRB, near normal or below normal for much of US

Statewide Average Temperature Ranks January - December 2025

Ranking Period: 1895-2025
NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information



Record Coldest (1)
Much Below Average
Below Average
Near Average
Above Average
Much Above Average
Record Warmest (131)

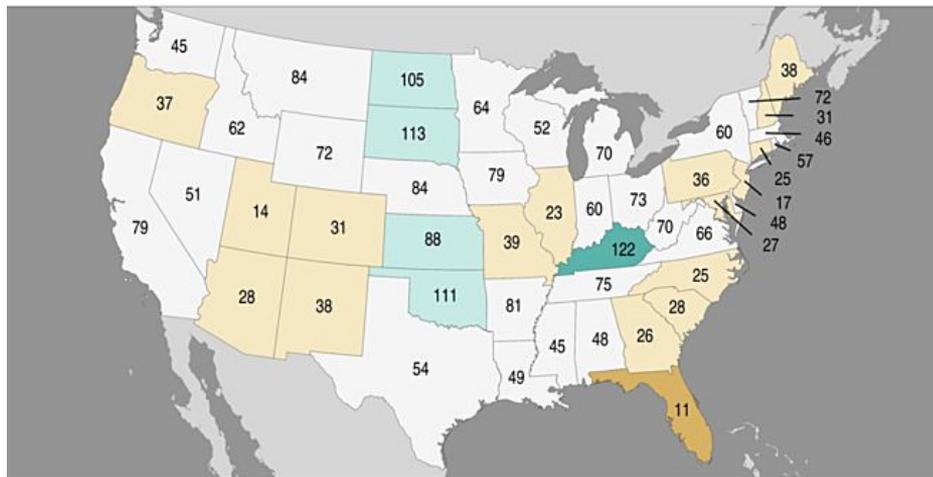


Created: Wed Jan 7 2026
Source: nClimGrid - Monthly

Above average for U.S. overall

Statewide Precipitation Ranks January - December 2025

Ranking Period: 1895-2025
NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information



Record Driest (1)
Much Below Average
Below Average
Near Average
Above Average
Much Above Average
Record Wettest (131)



Created: Wed Jan 7 2026
Source: nClimGrid - Monthly

Warmest or near warmest year for much of the west.

Warmest on record for U.S. overall

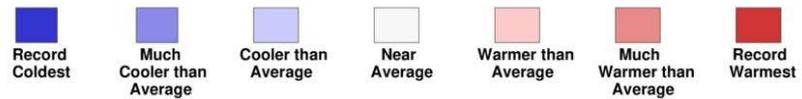
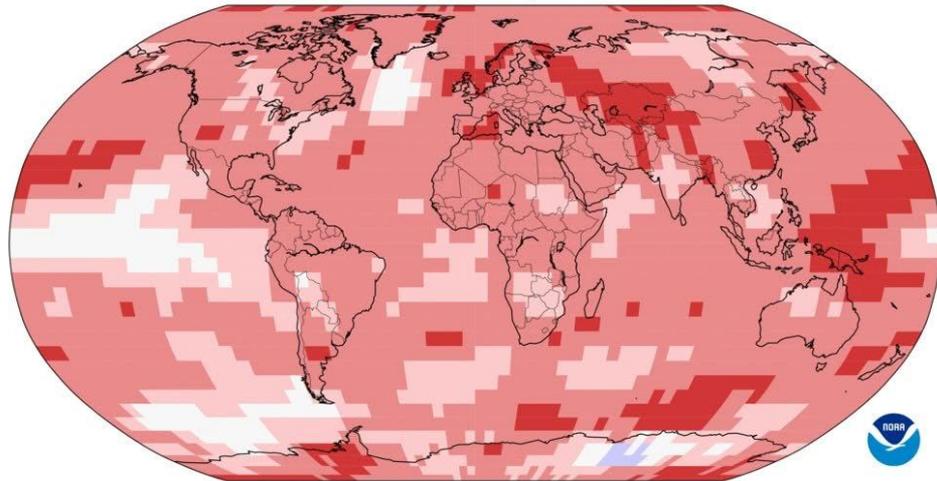
<https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/monitoring/us-maps/>



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2025 TEMPERATURE - GLOBAL

Land & Ocean Temperature Percentiles Jan-Dec 2025
NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information
Data Source: NOAAGlobalTemp v6.0.0-20260107

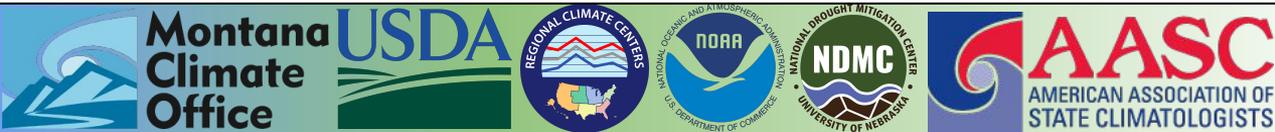


2025 ranks as the **third-warmest year on record**, since 1850

Annual sea ice extent for both the Arctic and Antarctic regions ranked among the three lowest years on record.

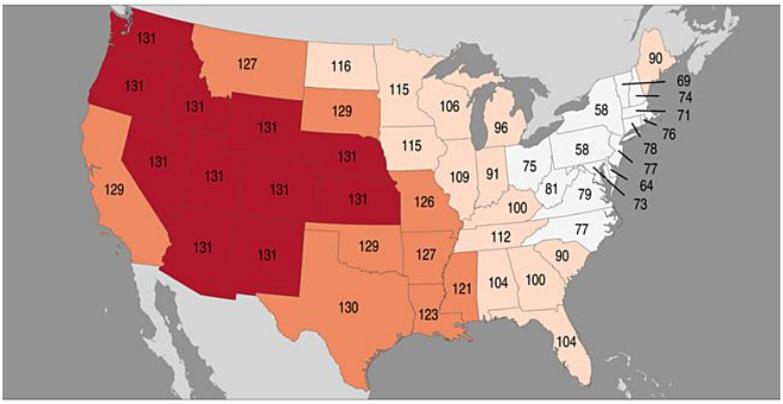
The Northern Hemisphere snow cover extent was the third lowest on record.

Recent Conditions



3 MONTH TEMPERATURE AND PRECIPITATION

Statewide Average Temperature Ranks
 October - December 2025
 Ranking Period: 1895-2025
 NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information



Created: Wed Jan 7 2026
 Source: nClimGrid - Monthly



National Average Temperature Rank
 December 2025
 Ranking Period: 1895-2025
 NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information

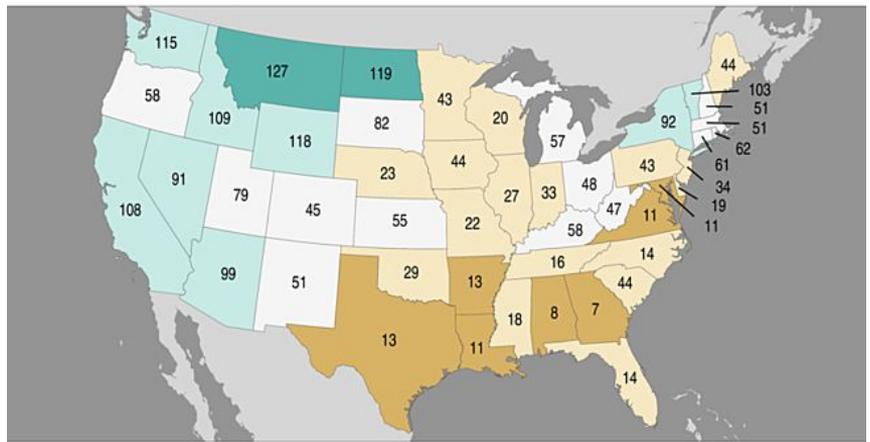


Created: Wed Jan 7 2026
 Source: nClimGrid - Monthly

37th Driest Oct - Dec for CONUS

drier than normal
(Wetter than Normal for UMRB)

Statewide Precipitation Ranks
 October - December 2025
 Ranking Period: 1895-2025
 NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information



Created: Wed Jan 7 2026
 Source: nClimGrid - Monthly



Near Record Warmest
 Oct - Dec for CONUS



<https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/monitoring/us-maps/>

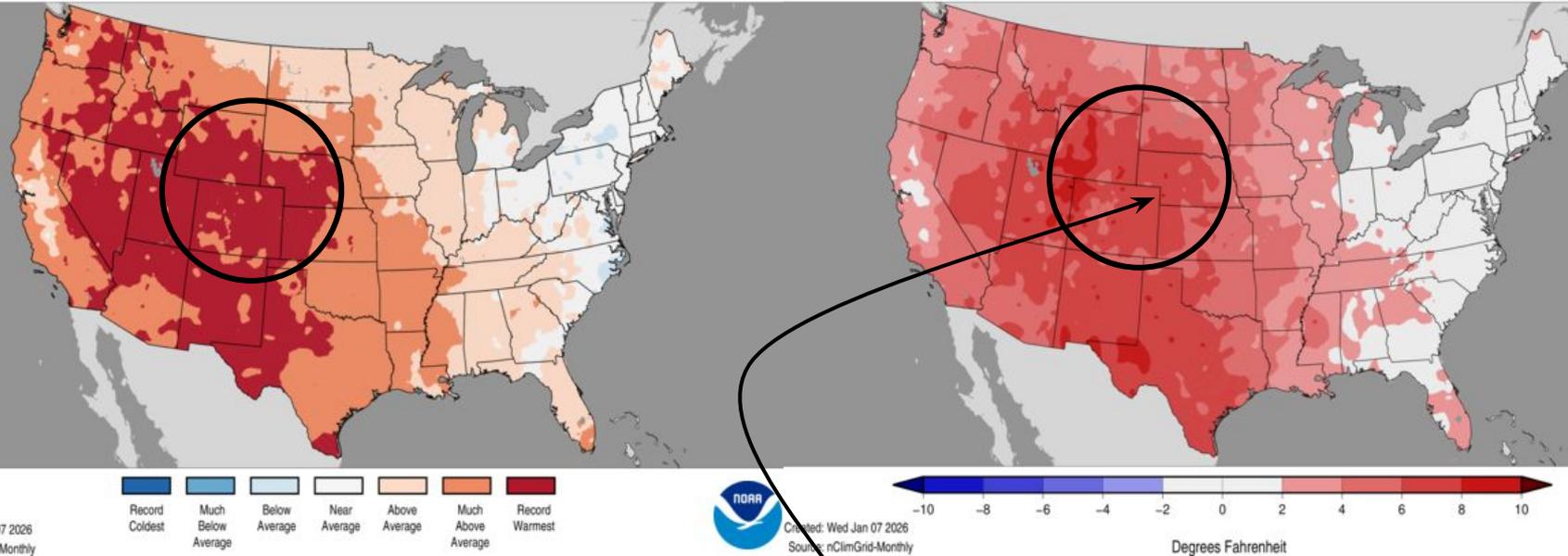


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3 MONTH TEMPERATURE PERCENTILE & ANOMALY

Mean Temperature Percentiles
October-December 2025
Ranking Period: 1895-2025
NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information

Mean Temperature Departures from Average
October-December 2025
Average Period: 1901-2000
NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information



Created: Wed Jan 07 2026
Source: nClimGrid-Monthly

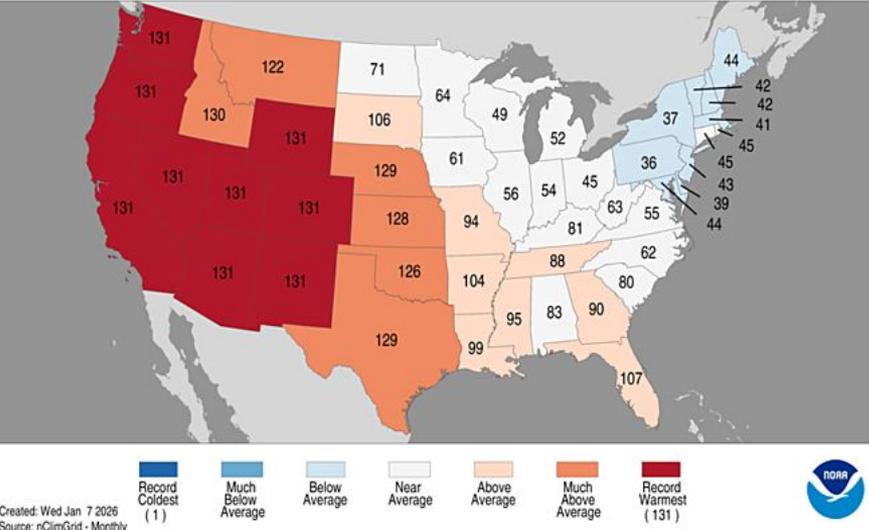
Created: Wed Jan 07 2026
Source: nClimGrid-Monthly

+4-8°F above normal on average!

<https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/monitoring/us-maps/>

1 MONTH TEMPERATURE AND PRECIPITATION

Statewide Average Temperature Ranks
 December 2025
 Ranking Period: 1895-2025
 NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information

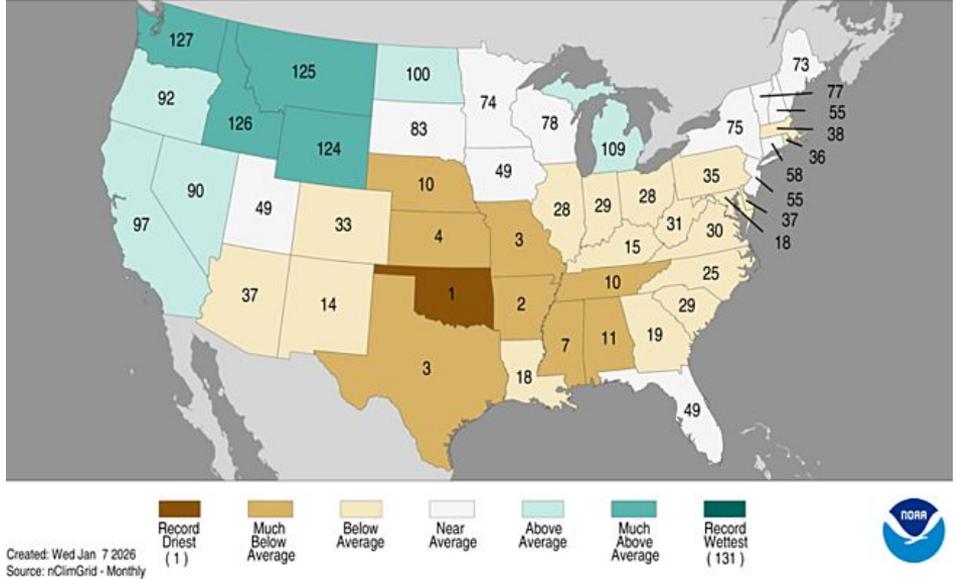


5th Warmest December for CONUS
 (127th of 131 Years)

<https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/monitoring/us-maps/>

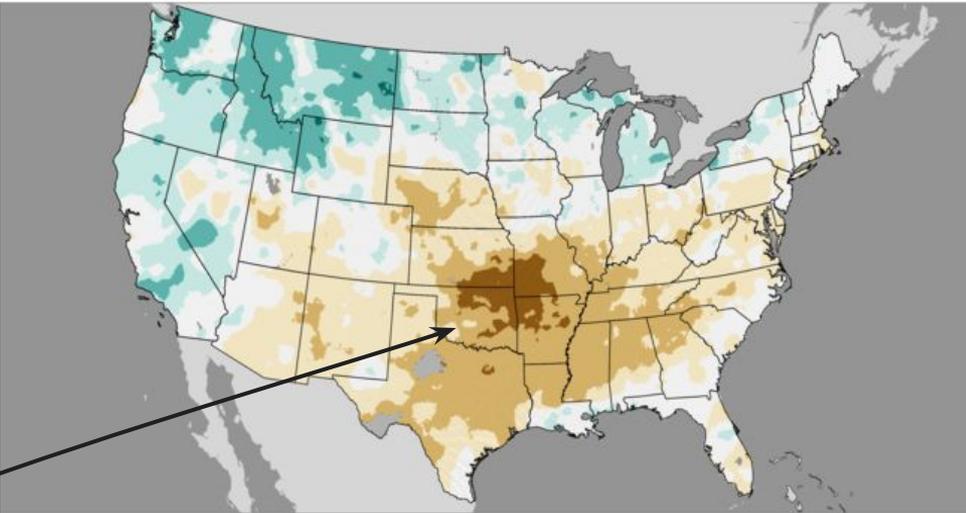
Average CONUS December Precipitation (37th of 131 Years)

Statewide Precipitation Ranks
 December 2025
 Ranking Period: 1895-2025
 NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information

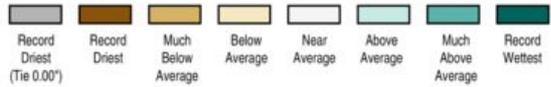


DECEMBER PRECIPITATION PERCENTILE

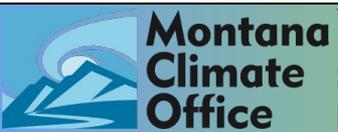
Total Precipitation Percentiles
December 2025
Ranking Period: 1895-2025
NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information



Created: Wed Jan 07 2026
Source: nClimGrid-Monthly



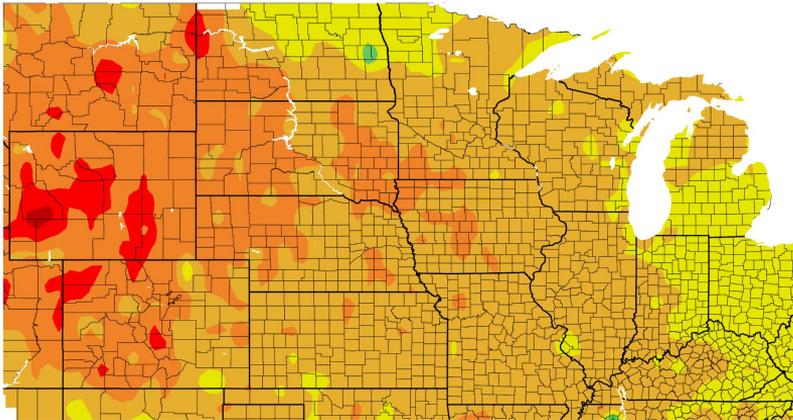
Record low precipitation in Kansas, Oklahoma, Missouri and Arkansas in December



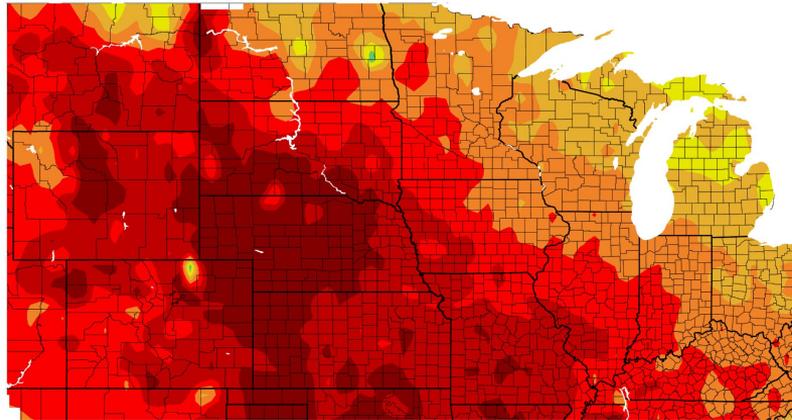
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Last 30 Days: Temperature departure from mean

Departure from Normal Average Minimum Temperature (F)
12/16/2025 – 1/14/2026



Departure from Normal Average Maximum Temperature (F)
12/16/2025 – 1/14/2026



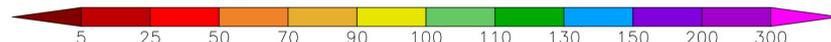
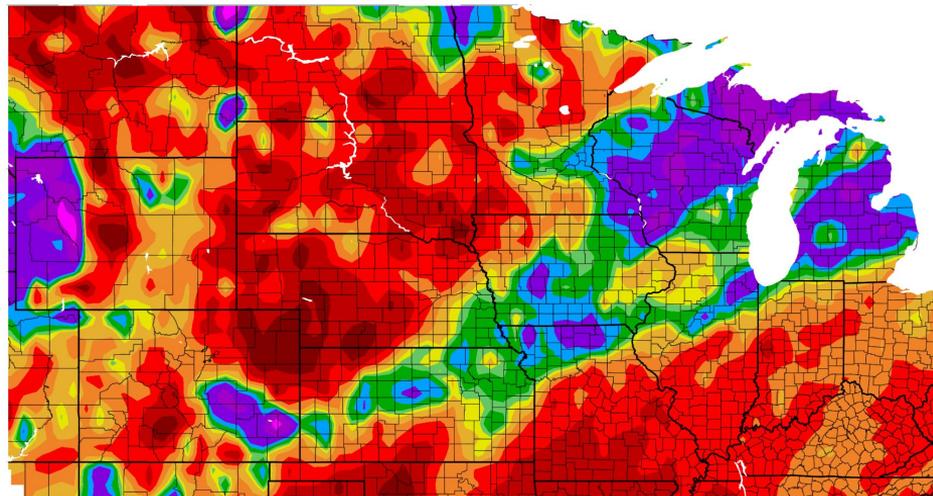
Generated 1/15/2026 using provisional data. ACIS Web Services

Generated 1/15/2026 using provisional data. ACIS Web Services

<https://hprcc.unl.edu/>

Last 30 Days: Precipitation Percent of Mean

Percent of Normal Precipitation (%)
12/16/2025 – 1/14/2026



Generated 1/15/2026 using provisional data.

ACIS Web Services

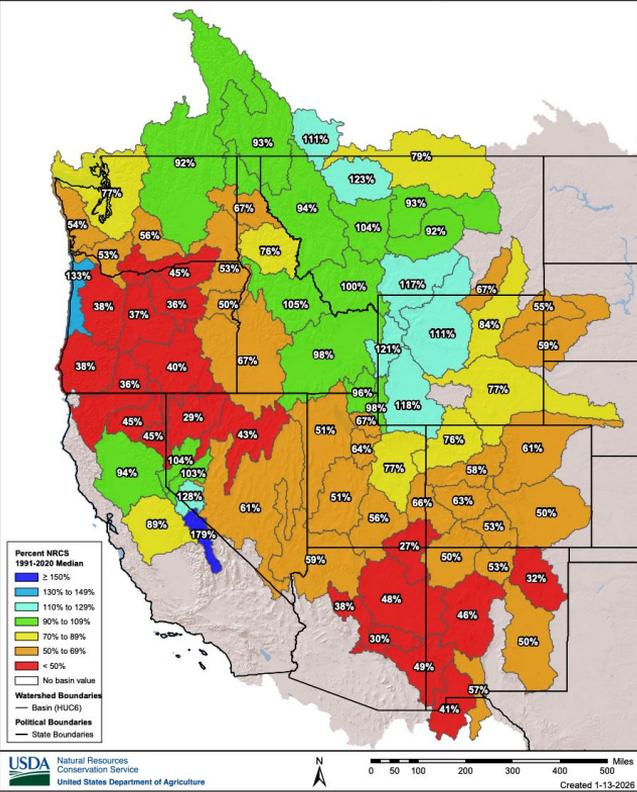
<https://hprcc.unl.edu/>



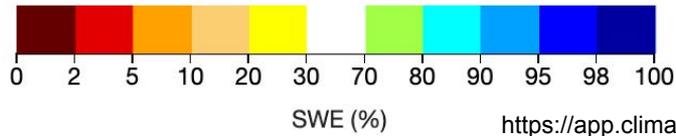
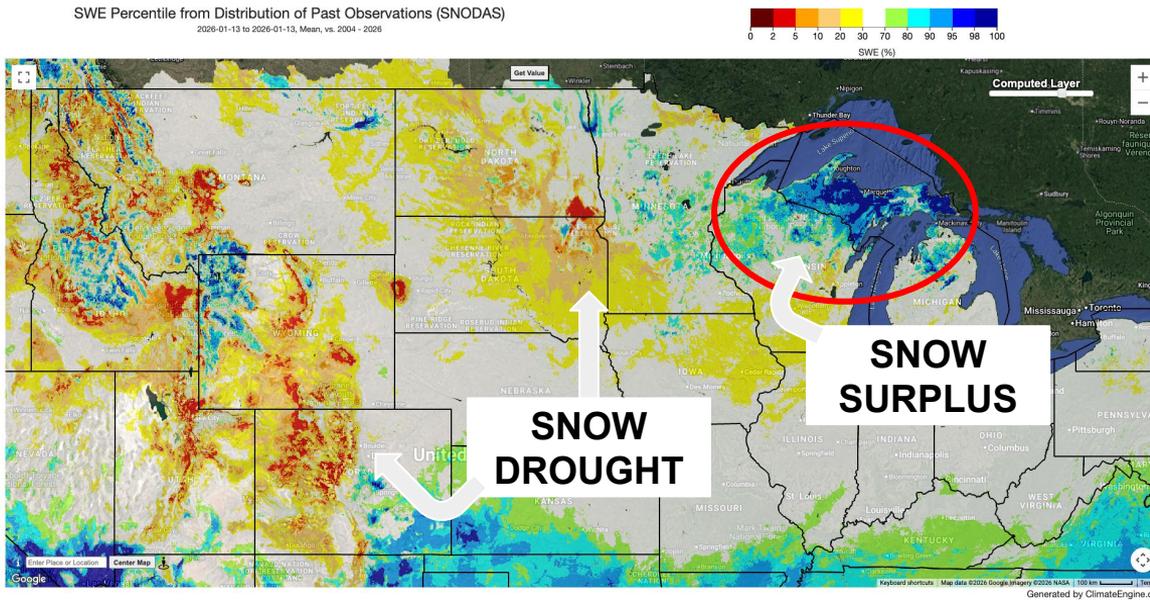
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SEASONAL SNOW WATER EQUIVALENT (ON THE GROUND CURRENTLY)

Snow Water Equivalent Westwide SNOTEL
Percent NRCS 1991-2020 Median January 12, 2026, end of day

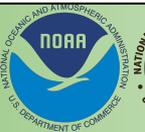
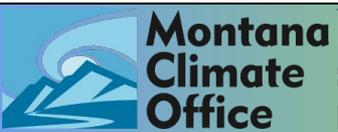


SWE Percentile from Distribution of Past Observations (SNODAS)
2026-01-13 to 2026-01-13, Mean, vs. 2004 - 2026



note period of record is 2004 - present

<https://app.climateengine.com/climateEngine>



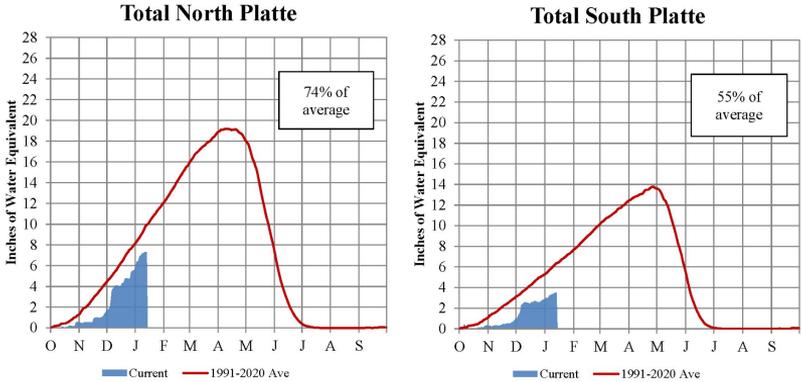
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SEASONAL SNOW WATER EQUIVALENT (SWE Accumulation)

PLATTE RIVER BASIN

Platte River Basin - Mountain Snowpack Water Content Water Year 2025-2026

January 14, 2026



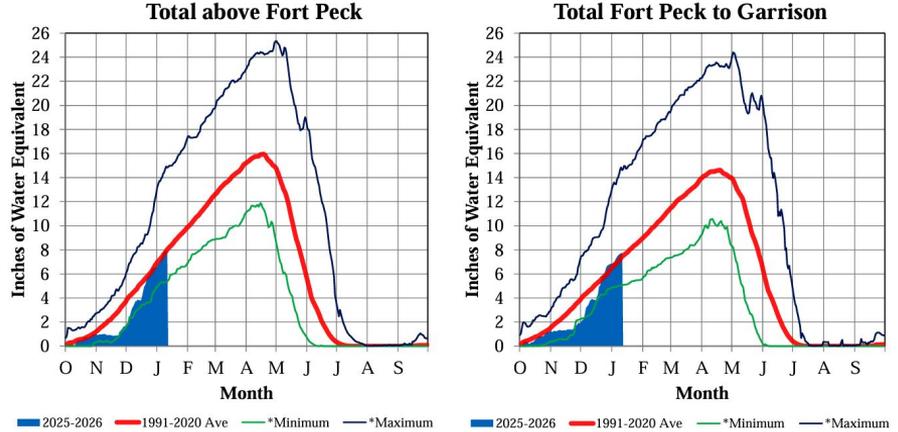
The North and South Platte River Basin mountain snowpacks normally peak near April 10 and the end of April, respectively. As of January 14, 2026, the mountain snowpack SWE in the "Total North Platte" reach is 7.3", 74% of the (1991-2020) average. The mountain snowpack SWE in the "Total South Platte" reach is 3.5", 55% of the (1991-2020) average.

Source: USDA, Natural Resource Conservation Service Provisional Data. Subject to Revision

MISSOURI RIVER BASIN

Missouri River Basin – Mountain Snowpack Water Content 2025-2026 with comparison plots from recent high and low years

11-Jan-2026



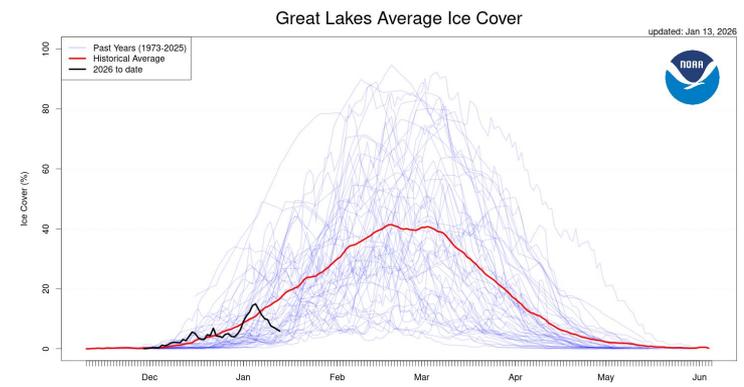
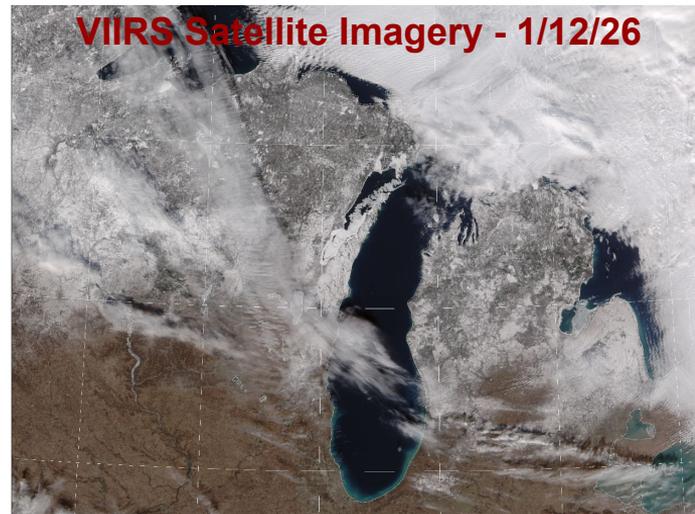
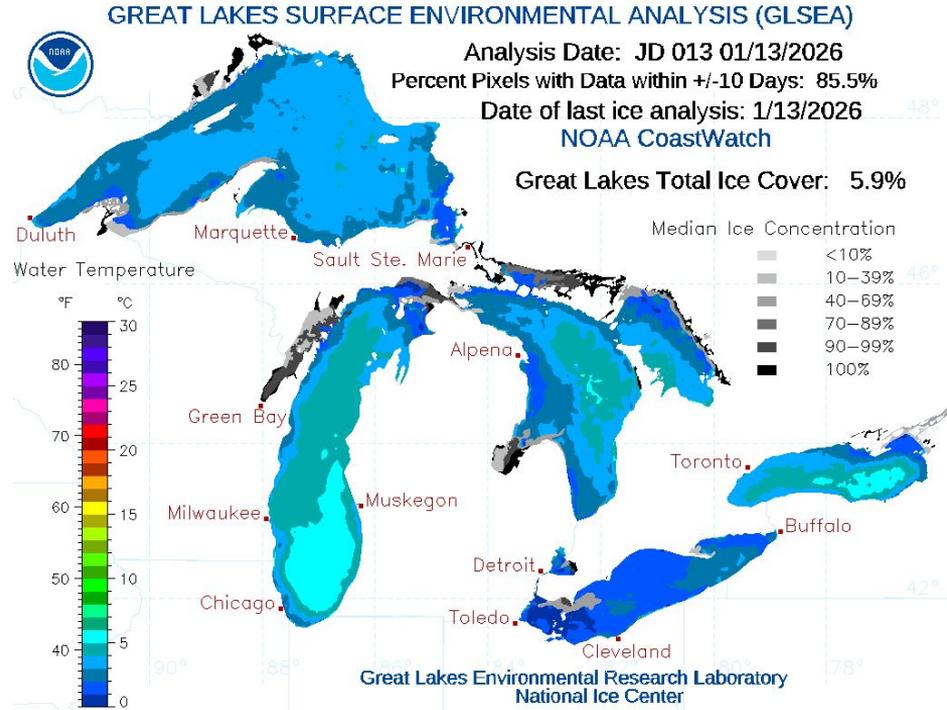
On January 11, 2026 the mountain Snow Water Equivalent (SWE) in the "Total above Fort Peck" reach is 7.9" and 99% of the (1991-2020) average. The mountain SWE in the "Fort Peck to Garrison" reach is 7.8" and 104% of the (1991-2020) average. The normal peak for both reaches occurs near April 17.

*Refers to the minimum or maximum SWE in the basin for that day in the historical years 1991-2020.

Provisional data. Subject to revision.

<https://www.nwd-mr.usace.army.mil/rcc/>

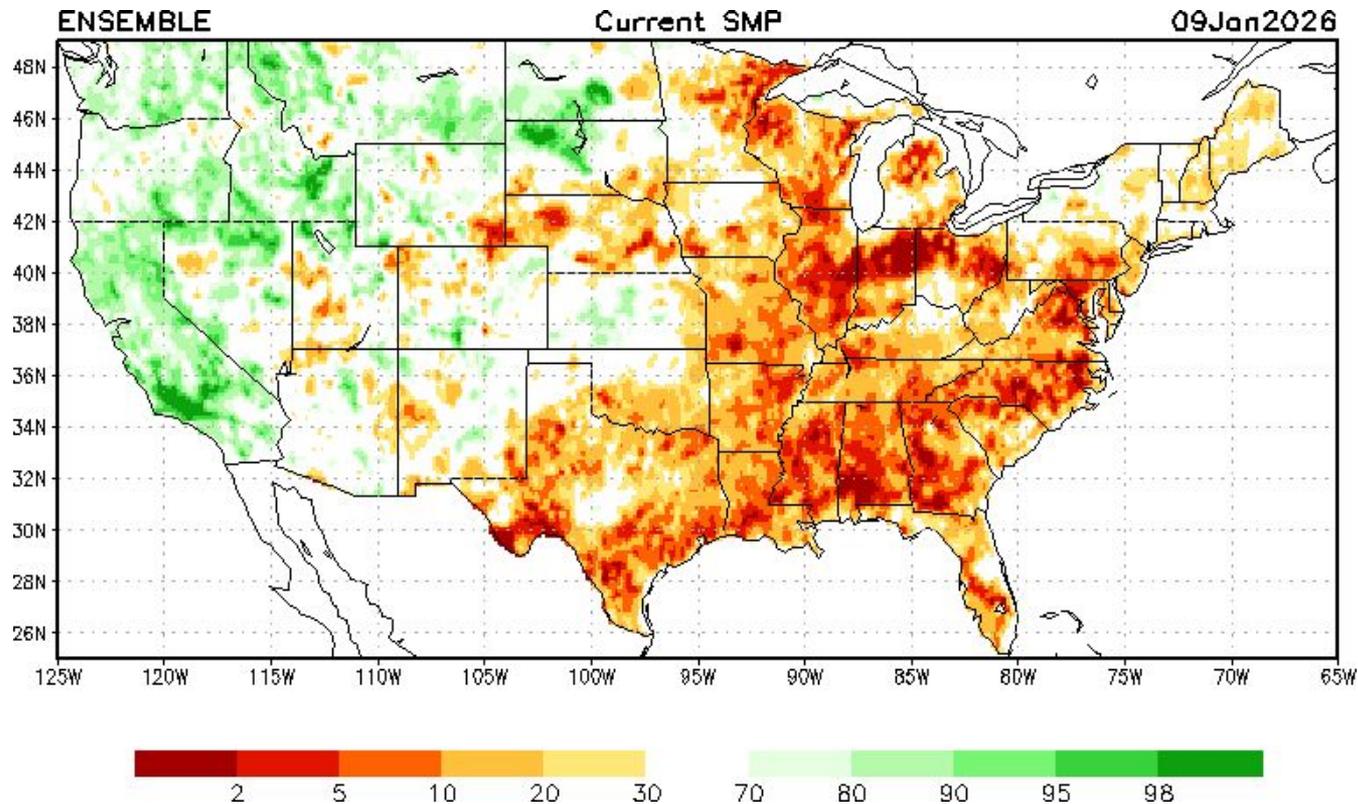
GREAT LAKES ICE COVER



5.9% Ice Cover - Well Below Normal

https://www.weather.gov/cle/GreatLakesIce_Analysis

SOIL MOISTURE PERCENTILES



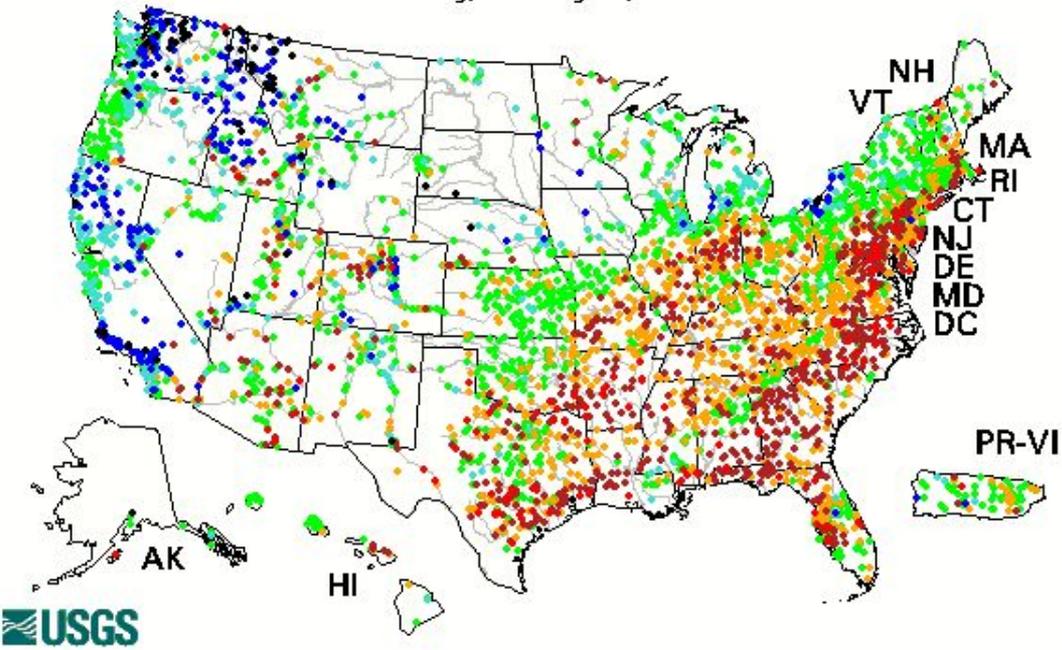
https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/Drought/Monitoring/smp_new.shtml



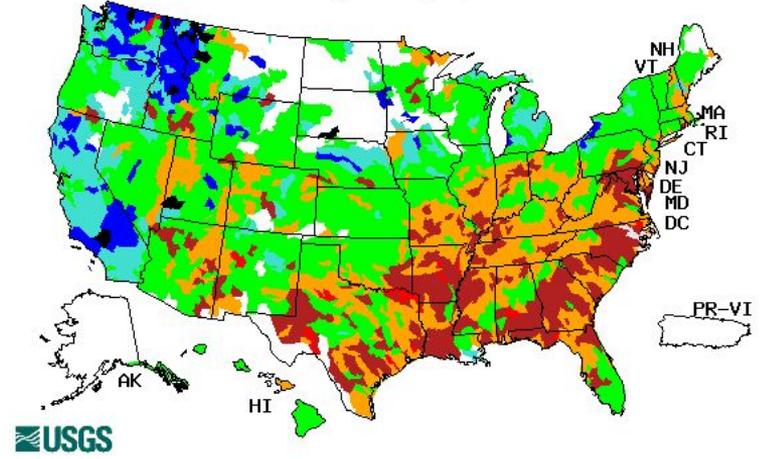
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STREAMFLOW PERCENTILES (28-day)

Tuesday, January 13, 2026



Tuesday, January 13, 2026



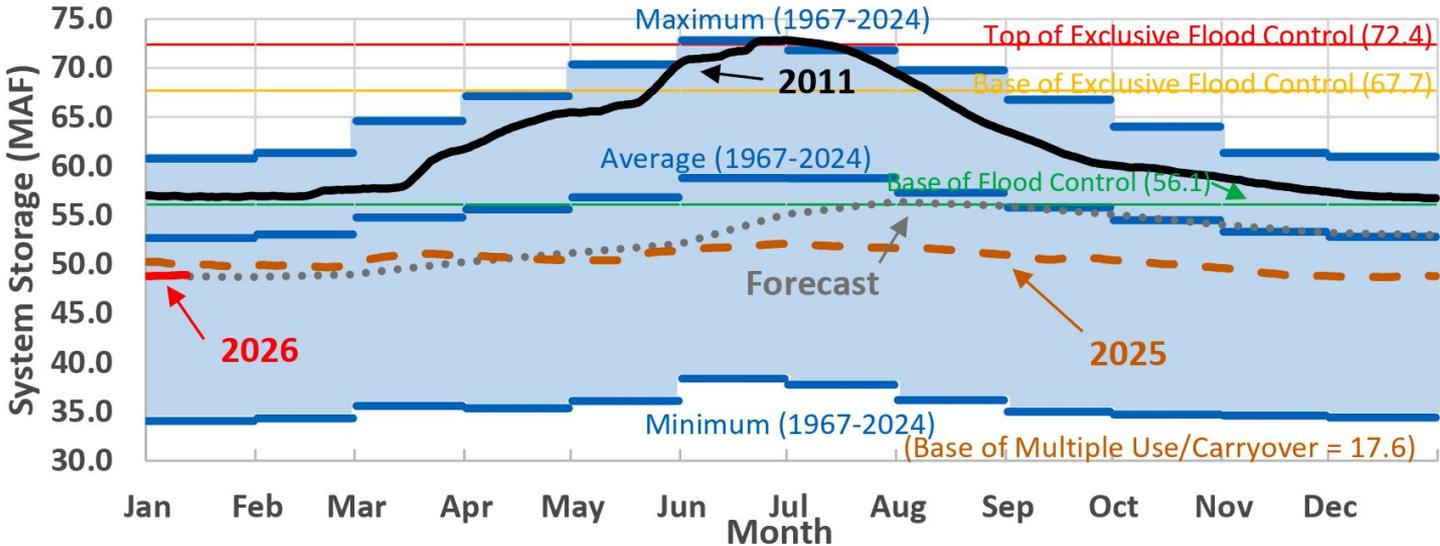
Explanation - Percentile classes

	<10	10-24	25-75	76-90	>90	High	No Data
Low	Much below normal	Below normal	Normal	Above normal	Much above normal		

<https://waterwatch.usgs.gov/>

MISSOURI RIVER RESERVOIR STORAGE

System Storage Comparison



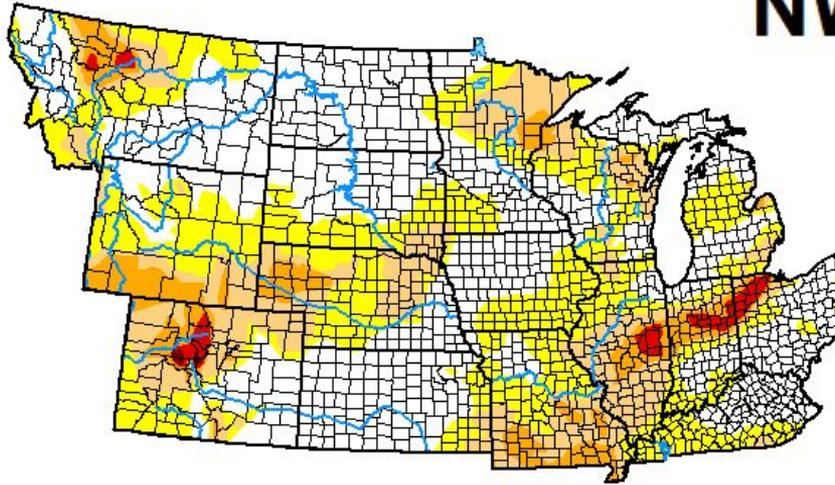
“Mountain snowpack is currently near average in both the Fort Peck and Garrison reaches”

<https://www.nwd-mr.usace.army.mil/rcc/reports/pdfs/weeklyupdate.pdf>

U.S. DROUGHT MONITOR

U.S. Drought Monitor NWS Central

January 13, 2026
(Released Thursday, Jan. 15, 2026)
Valid 7 a.m. EST



Drought Conditions (Percent Area)

	None	D0-D4	D1-D4	D2-D4	D3-D4	D4
Current	45.43	54.57	25.29	8.35	1.43	0.07
Last Week 01-06-2026	38.91	61.09	29.46	8.46	1.41	0.06
3 Months Ago 10-14-2025	42.00	58.00	30.72	14.03	3.44	0.00
Start of Calendar Year 01-06-2026	38.91	61.09	29.46	8.46	1.41	0.06
Start of Water Year 09-30-2025	45.92	54.08	28.92	14.16	3.88	0.00
One Year Ago 01-14-2025	32.20	67.80	45.72	19.43	5.80	0.00

Intensity:

- None
- D0 Abnormally Dry
- D1 Moderate Drought
- D2 Severe Drought
- D3 Extreme Drought
- D4 Exceptional Drought

The Drought Monitor focuses on broad-scale conditions. Local conditions may vary. For more information on the Drought Monitor, go to <https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/About.aspx>

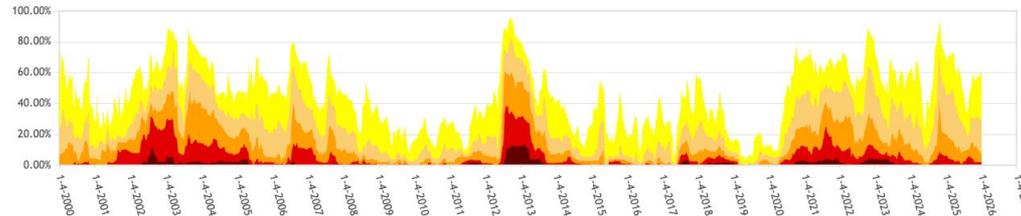
Author:

Brian Fuchs
National Drought Mitigation Center



droughtmonitor.unl.edu

NWS Central Region Percent Area in U.S. Drought Monitor Categories



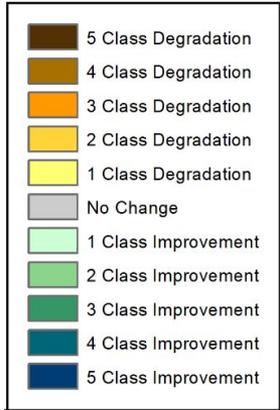
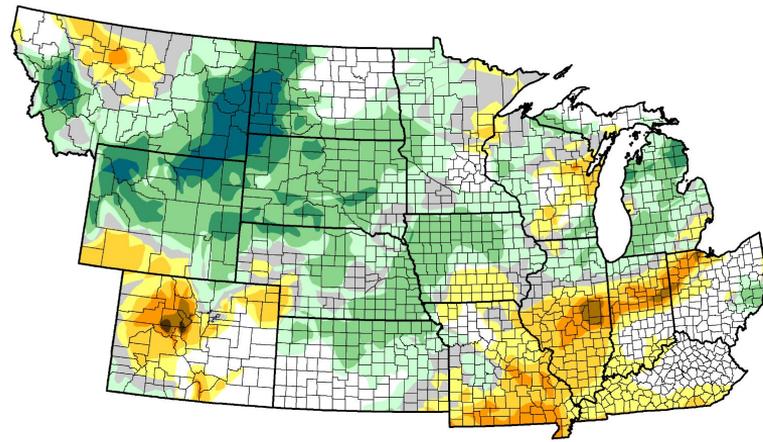
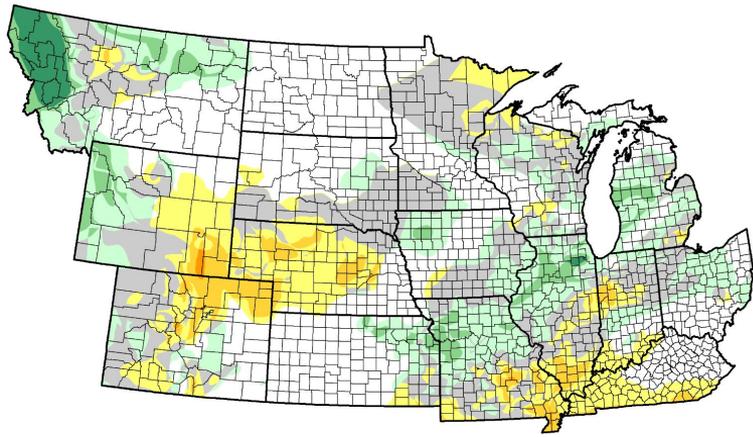
<https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/>

U.S. DROUGHT MONITOR CHANGE (10 WEEK and 1 YEAR)



U.S. Drought Monitor Class Change - NWS Central
10 Week

U.S. Drought Monitor Class Change - NWS Central
52 Week



January 13, 2026
compared to
November 4, 2025

January 13, 2026
compared to
January 14, 2025

droughtmonitor.unl.edu

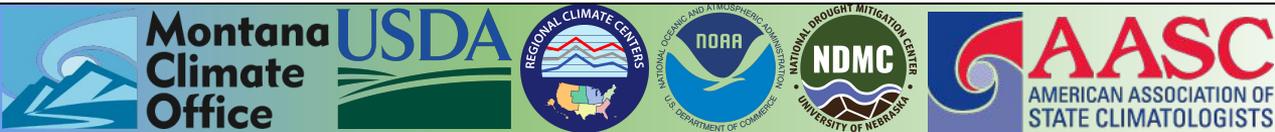
droughtmonitor.unl.edu

<https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/>



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Impacts



December Wind Event!

- Bynum W - MT Mesonet Station in Teton County recorded **104 mph on Dec. 17**
- Rapid City, S.D., reported a **record 94 mph Dec. 18.**
- **Governor Gianforte Issues Executive Order Declaring Wind Disaster (Dec 17) in Montana**
- The event was driven by rapid cyclogenesis in a mid-latitude cyclone crossing the Rockies.
- First of its kind "Particularly Dangerous Situation" issued in Colorado for high fire danger
- Caused widespread damage to power lines, trees, vehicles, and buildings, generating extensive debris.



Montana Climate Office @mt_climate

Top five wind gusts recorded by the #MontanaMesonet so far today:

- 1) 104 mph (!!!): Bynum W (Teton Co.)
- 2) 95 mph: Dog Gun Lake E (Glacier Co.)
- 3) 90 mph: Augusta N (Teton Co.)
- 4) 88 mph: Mission Lake S (Glacier Co.)
- 5) 85 mph: Rothiemay W (Golden Valley Co.)

#MTwx

3:05 PM · Dec 17, 2025 · 1111 Views

**STATE OF MONTANA
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
EXECUTIVE ORDER NO. 11-2025**

EXECUTIVE ORDER DECLARING A DISASTER TO EXIST WITHIN THE STATE OF MONTANA

WHEREAS, on December 17, 2025 Montana began experiencing a severe, damaging high-wind event with record setting high winds, including gusts over 90 mph and sustained winds near 65 miles per hour (mph), which caused widespread damage to power lines, trees, vehicles, and buildings, and created large amounts of debris from fallen or damaged trees;

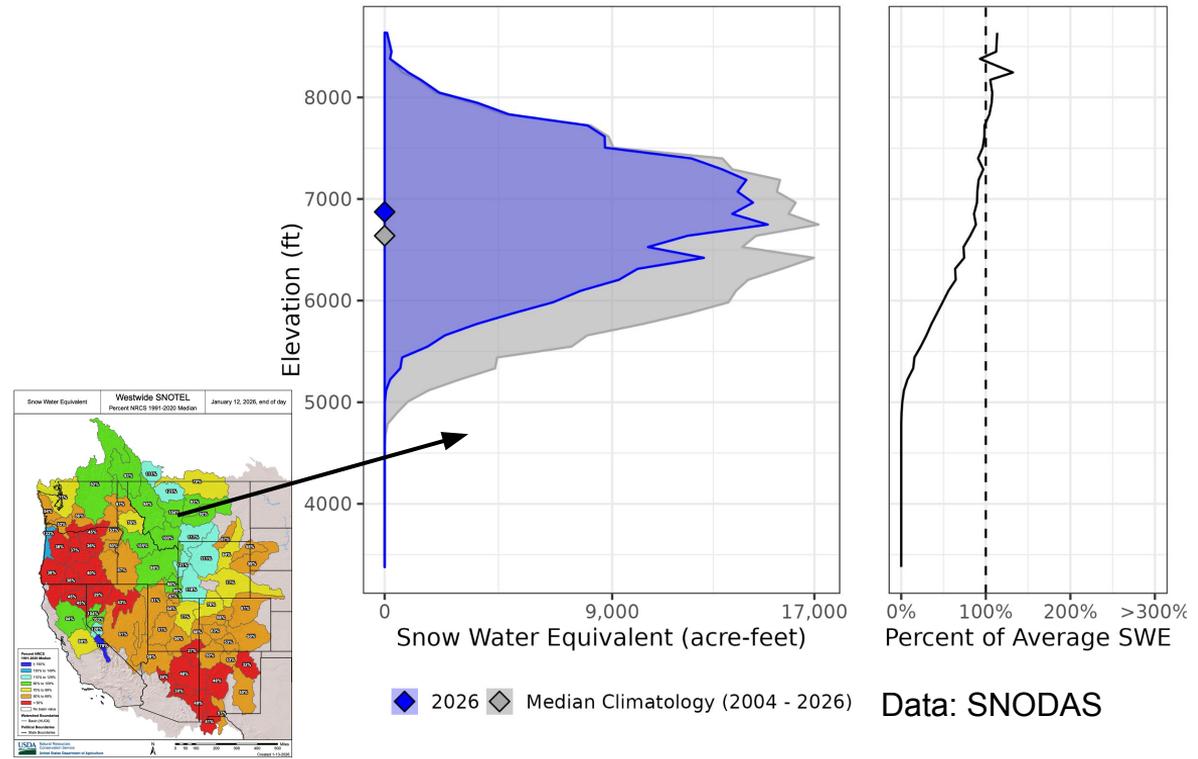
WHEREAS, as of 3:00 pm December 17, 2025, every county in Montana was under a National Weather Service “High Wind Warning” with numerous communities and tens of thousands of residents without power and roads closed as a result of downed trees and power lines;

An Unconventional Snowpack

- Snow accumulation this season is **highly elevation-dependent**
- Warm temperatures have **raised the rain–snow transition**
- Mountains retained snow; **lower elevations did not**
- Snowpack structure matters for **runoff timing and water supply**

SUN RIVER MT - TRIBUTARY TO THE MISSOURI

2026-01-14 (72% of Normal)



An Unconventional Snowpack and Snow Drought!

Climate change makes snowmaking a necessity, not a backup, for the West's ski resorts

As warming temperatures amplify drought in the Mountain West, ski areas across the region are considering how best to use increasingly scarce water resources.

AXIOS Denver Sign up for the newsletter

Community Radio - December 22, 2025

Colorado is on track for its worst snowpack on record

Alayna Alvarez

Facebook X LinkedIn Email Add Axios on Google



Sparse snow conditions seen at Arapahoe Basin ski resort in Colorado's Summit County in mid-December. Photo: Hyoung Chang/The Denver Post via Getty Images

Climate Climate NEW Watch Subscribe Sign in

CLIMATE • 4 MIN READ

The western US is in a snow drought, raising fears for summer water supplies

UPDATED JAN 9, 2026
By Andrew Freedman

Bloomberg Subscribe

Wildfire Season: How to Protect Your Home | Utilities Turn to AI | Smoke and Air Quality | HEPA Filters < >

Newsletter | Weather Watch

California's La Niña Paradox: Heavy Rain, Scant Snow Raise Fire Risks

Warm ocean temperatures have spawned ridges of high pressure across the North Pacific, bringing record rainfall but less snow, threatening a crucial reservoir used by farmers, cities, and hydroelectric power providers during summer.

AP Minneapolis Immigrant visa pause Verizon outage

U.S. NEWS

Warm weather and low snowpack bedevil Western ski resorts

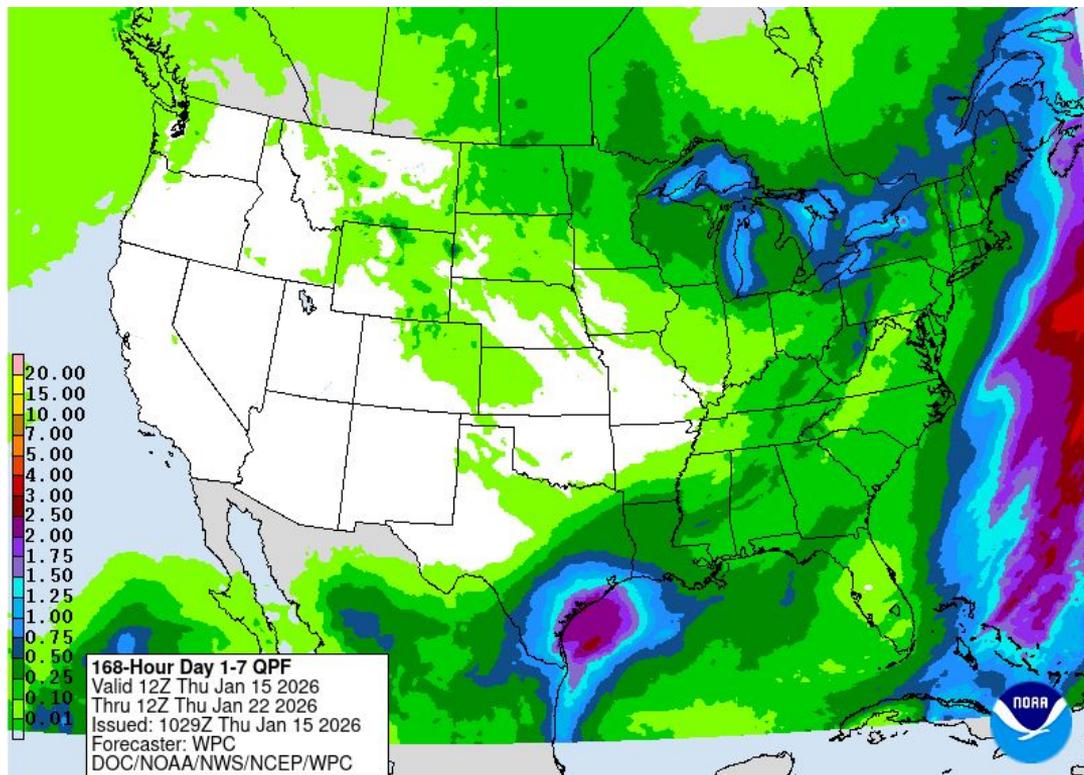


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Outlook



7 DAY PRECIPITATION FORECAST (January 15 - 22)



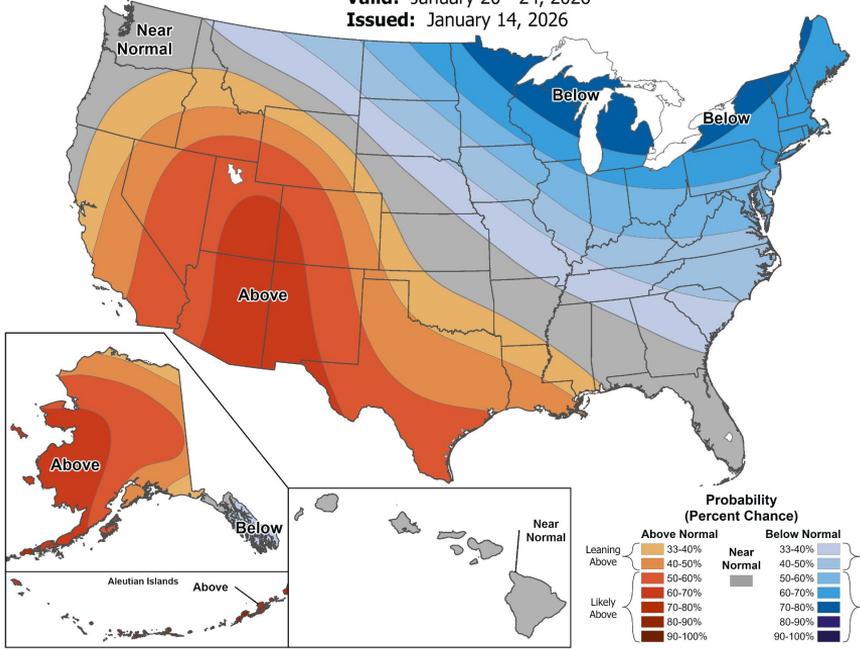
<https://www.wpc.ncep.noaa.gov/qpf/day1-7.shtml>

6-10 DAY TEMPERATURE OUTLOOK



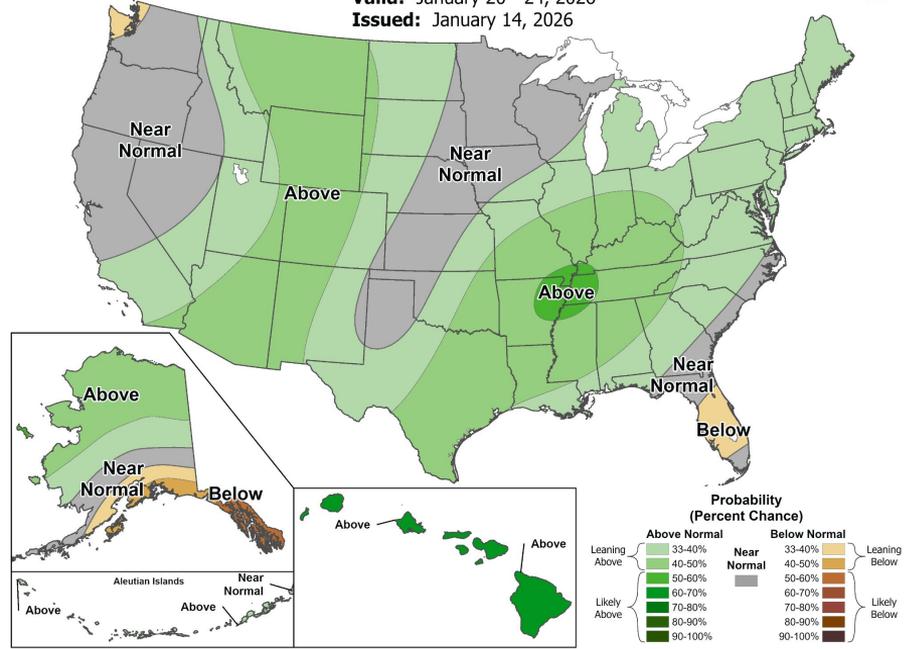
6-10 Day Temperature Outlook

Valid: January 20 - 24, 2026
 Issued: January 14, 2026



6-10 Day Precipitation Outlook

Valid: January 20 - 24, 2026
 Issued: January 14, 2026



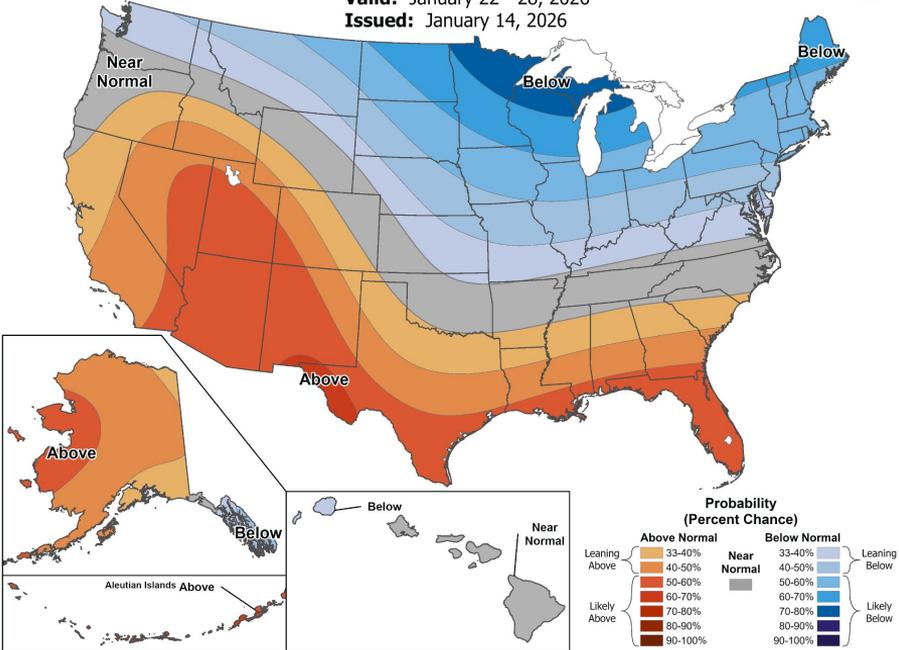
<https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/predictions/610day/>

8-14 DAY OUTLOOK



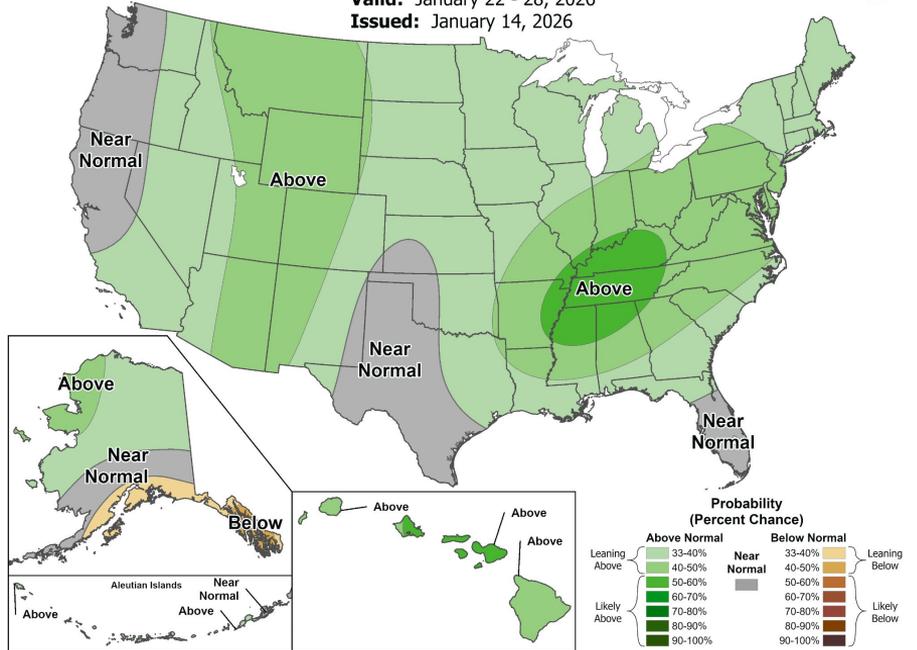
8-14 Day Temperature Outlook

Valid: January 22 - 28, 2026
Issued: January 14, 2026



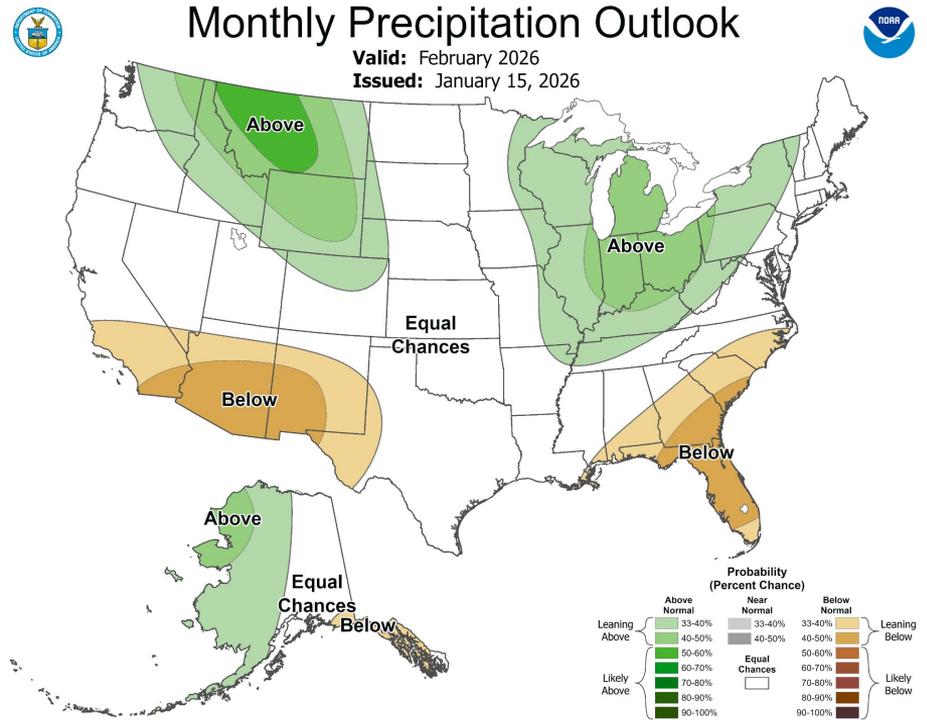
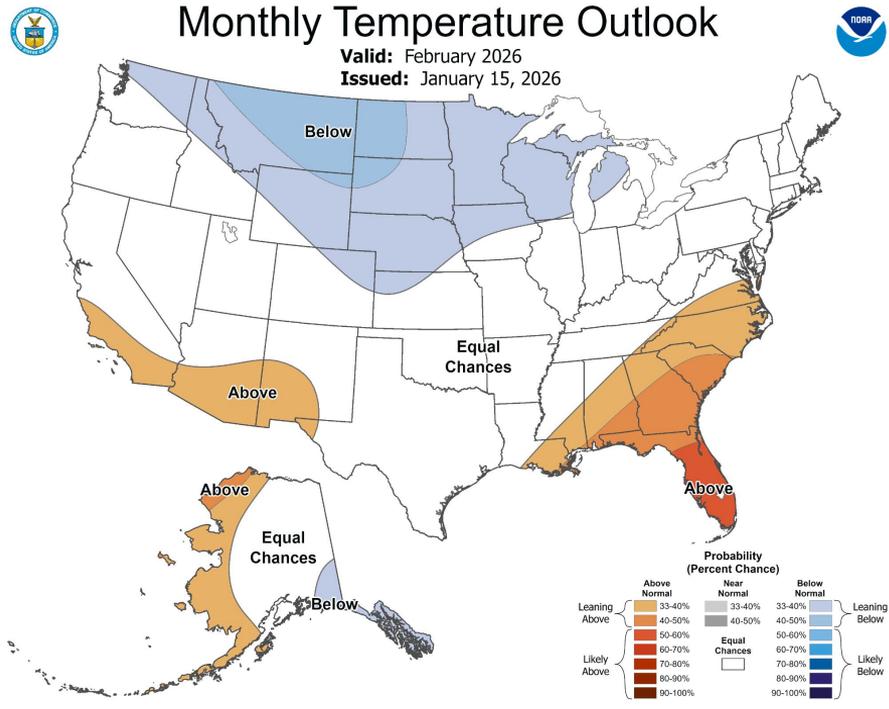
8-14 Day Precipitation Outlook

Valid: January 22 - 28, 2026
Issued: January 14, 2026



<https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/predictions/814day/>

1 MONTH OUTLOOK



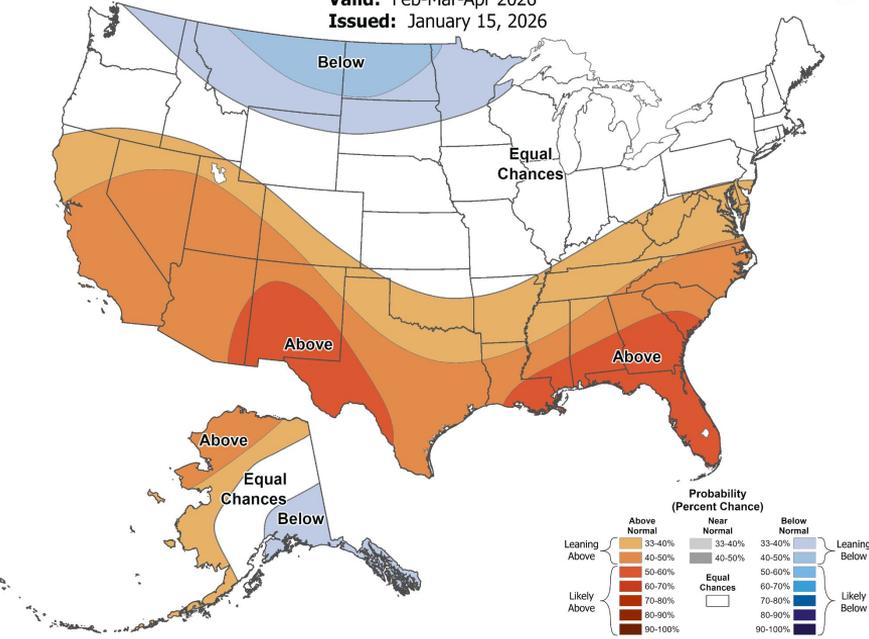
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3 MONTH OUTLOOK



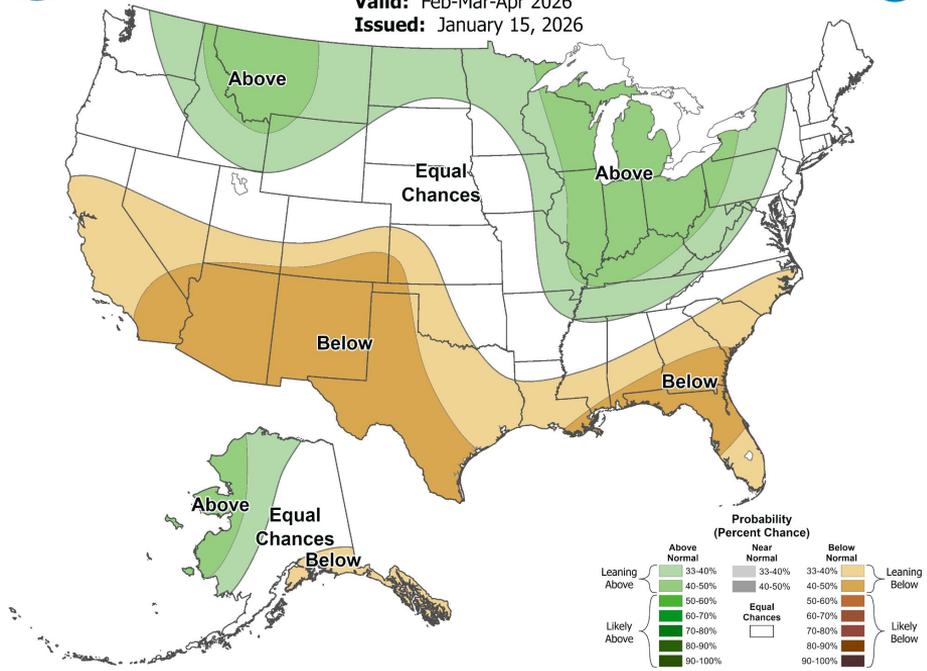
Seasonal Temperature Outlook

Valid: Feb-Mar-Apr 2026
 Issued: January 15, 2026



Seasonal Precipitation Outlook

Valid: Feb-Mar-Apr 2026
 Issued: January 15, 2026



https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/predictions/long_range/seasonal.php?lead=1



Central Region Climate & Drought Outlook
 Dr. Zachary Hoylman, Montana Climate Office
 University of Montana
 Missoula, MT - 1/15/2026

El Niño/La Niña (ENSO) PROBABILITY

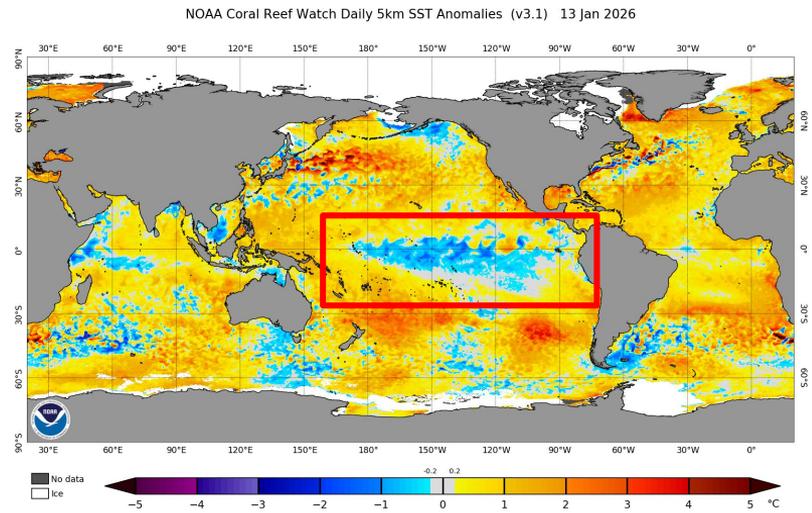
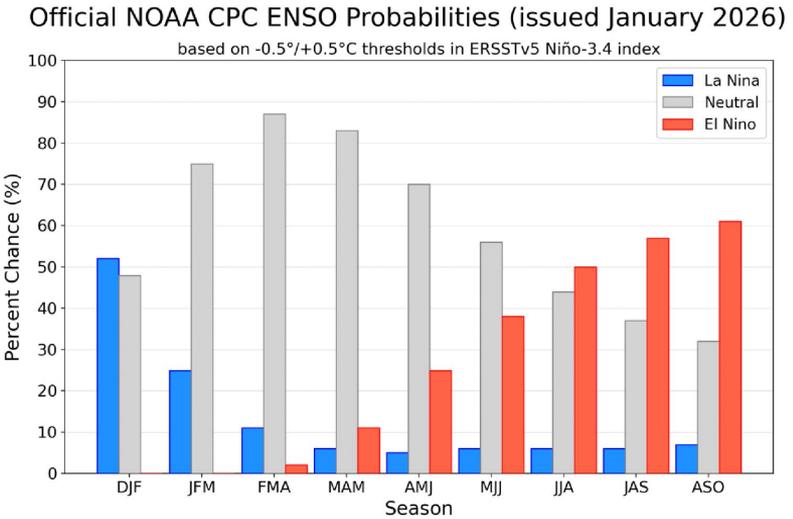


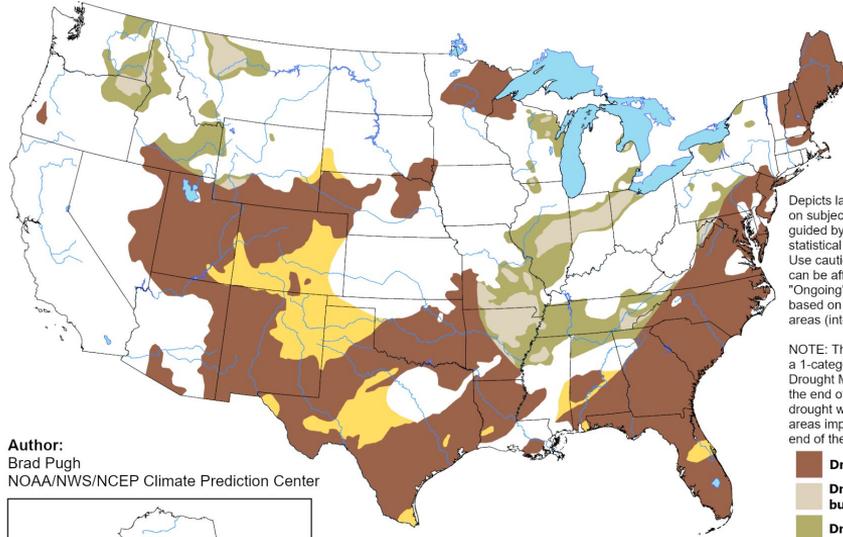
Figure 7. Official ENSO probabilities for the Niño 3.4 sea surface temperature index (5°N-5°S, 120°W-170°W). Figure updated 8 January 2026.

https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/analysis_monitoring/enso_advisory/ensodisc.shtml

OUTLOOK: DROUGHT

U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook Drought Tendency During the Valid Period

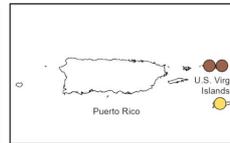
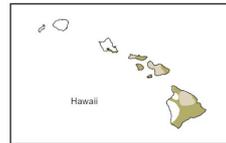
Valid for January 15 - April 30, 2026
Released January 15, 2026



Depicts large-scale trends based on subjectively derived probabilities guided by short- and long-range statistical and dynamical forecasts. Use caution for applications that can be affected by short lived events. "Ongoing" drought areas are based on the U.S. Drought Monitor areas (intensities of D1 to D4).

NOTE: The tan areas imply at least a 1-category improvement in the Drought Monitor intensity levels by the end of the period, although drought will remain. The green areas imply drought removal by the end of the period (D0 or none).

Author:
Brad Pugh
NOAA/NWS/NCEP Climate Prediction Center



-  Drought persists
-  Drought remains, but improves
-  Drought removal likely
-  Drought development likely
-  No drought



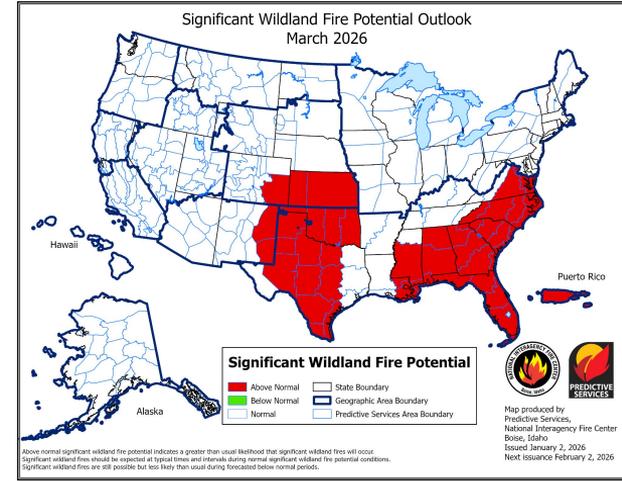
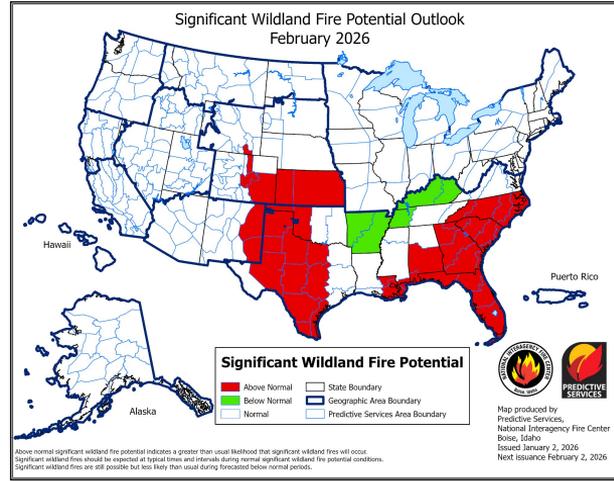
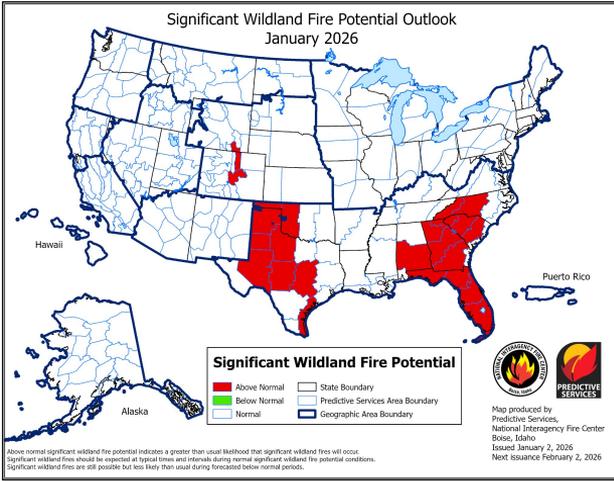
<https://go.usa.gov/3eZ73>

https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/expert_assessment/sdo_summary.php



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Significant Wildfire Potential Outlook



JANUARY



FEBRUARY



MARCH

<https://www.nifc.gov/nicc/predictive-services/outlooks>



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Dr. Zachary Hoylman, Montana Climate Office
University of Montana
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SUMMARY

- Recent Conditions

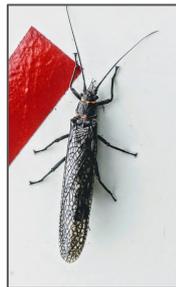
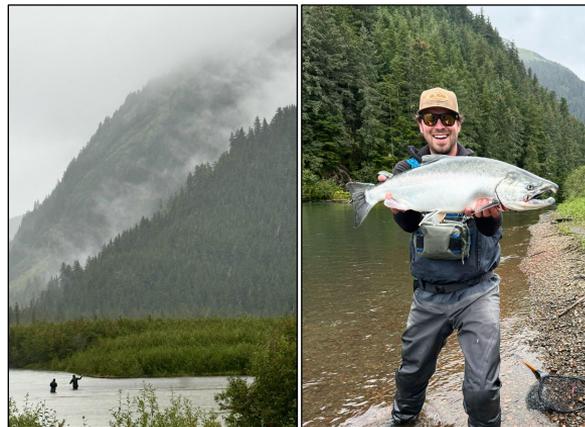
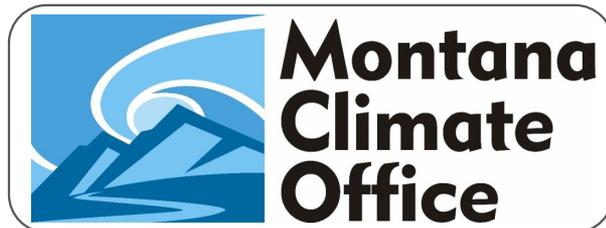
- **Temperature: 2025 and early winter were exceptionally warm**, record warmth across much of the West and Great Plains, above-normal temperatures regionwide.
- **Precipitation: Highly variable**: wetter in the Upper Missouri Basin, but record December dryness in parts of Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma.
- **Snow: Snowpack is highly elevation-dependent**, with near-normal mountain snow in Montana and Wyoming, pronounced snow drought in Colorado, emerging deficits in the Dakotas, and surpluses near the Great Lakes.
- **Streamflow**: Generally below normal across the middle and lower Missouri Basin, with frozen gauges limiting observations farther north.
- **Drought**: Mixed signals: short-term improvements in parts of the Midwest, but worsening drought across Nebraska, eastern Wyoming, northeast Colorado, Illinois and Indiana

- Outlooks

- **Short term**: Leaning wet and cool for northern portions of the domain, equal chances elsewhere
- **Long term**: Generally similar to short term outlooks
- **ENSO Forecast**: Weak La Niña is here, expected to transition to neutral by spring
- **Drought**: A mix of degradations and improvements are expected



Thank You! Questions?



RELEVANT CONTACTS

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