



Current Drought

Three heavy precipitation events since October 1, 2025 eliminated drought in Southern California* (Fig. 1), with regional precipitation reaching the upper 30th percentile. However, record-low precipitation during this period was observed over much of the Southwest U.S., including the Upper Colorado River Basin, which supplies water to California.

Winter snowpack in the Southwest U.S. becomes California's water resources in subsequent months and years. Snow water equivalent (the volume of water stored in snow) in the Southwest U.S. was significantly below average (Fig. 2) due to below-average precipitation since October 1, 2025 (Fig. 1) and warm temperatures. Snow water equivalent in the Upper Colorado Basin was the lowest on record since 1991 (Fig. 2).

Drought Outlook and Predictability

The Southwest United States is expected to experience below-average precipitation and above-average temperatures between March and May 2026 (Figure 3), according to the National Weather Service Climate Prediction Center, which would increase the possibility of low water availability in Southern California.

Sector-Specific Outlooks

Water Utilities



Reservoir and groundwater storage is expected to be average or above-average in California through 2026 (high confidence).

Low inflows into Lakes Powell and Mead are expected, which may impact water supply (high confidence) and power generation (medium confidence) in late 2026 and 2027.

Public Health



Blowing dust is expected to cause poor air quality from March to June 2026 (high confidence), alongside rising Valley fever cases through fall 2026 (high confidence).

Risk of poor air quality due to wildfire smoke is low through spring 2026, (high confidence), but will increase in summer and autumn amid warm temperatures in the dry season (medium confidence).

Agriculture



High agricultural productivity through early 2026, though risk of crop stress increases in spring and summer 2026 (high confidence).

Low regional reservoir levels in 2025-2026, may reduce available water for irrigation, which may reduce agricultural productivity in late 2026-2027 (medium confidence).

* Here, Southern California includes San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura, Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Orange, Riverside, San Diego, and Imperial counties.



About the Outlook

This outlook disseminates sector-specific drought scenarios that are based on tailored monitoring and forecasting information, which will enable users to make proactive decisions ahead of drought. The focus sectors include water utilities, agriculture, and public health in Southern California. This outlook uses data available as of February 26, 2026 at 10 a.m. PT unless indicated otherwise.

Several perspectives inform sector-specific drought scenarios, including observations of current conditions and expert interpretation of many types of forecasts to anticipate the future. [View graphics and supporting evidence.](#)

