April 2026 Southern California Sector-Specific Drought Outlook Pilot

Current Drought

Four precipitation events since October 1, 2025 eliminated drought in Southern California.* However, no precipitation in the last two months, combined with recent exceptional temperatures and demand of water from the land surface (Fig. 1, right), has raised concerns of emerging abnormal dryness and drought in the region. Parts of the Southwest U.S. observed record low precipitation during this period, including the Upper Colorado River Basin, which supplies water to California.

Wintertime snowpack in the Southwest U.S. becomes California's water resources in subsequent months and years. As of April 22, 2026, snow water equivalent (the volume of water stored in snow) in the Southwest U.S. was significantly below median (Fig. 2) due to below-average precipitation since October 1, 2025 and exceptional temperatures (Fig. 1). Snow water equivalent in the Upper Colorado Region is currently the lowest on record since 1991 following a rapid decline since early March.

Drought Outlook and Predictability

The Southwest United States is expected to experience above-average temperatures through summer 2026 (Figure 3), which would increase the possibility of wildfire and related illness, heat-related illness, and 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 from the Colorado River are expected this year, which could impact water supply (high confidence) and power generation (medium confidence) in late 2026 and 2027.

Public Health

Expect poor air quality from blowing dust in April to June (high confidence) and wildfire smoke in summer and autumn (high confidence). Valley fever cases are expected to rise in spring, summer, and autumn of 2026. There is a high risk of heat-related illnesses in Southern California and throughout the Southwest U.S. between spring and autumn 2026 (high confidence).

Agriculture

High agricultural productivity is expected in late 2025 and early 2026 (high confidence). An increased risk of crop stress exists in spring and summer 2026 (high confidence). With low water levels in regional reservoirs in 2025 and 2026, less water may be available for irrigated agriculture in 2026 and 2027, which would reduce agricultural productivity (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 April 23, 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.

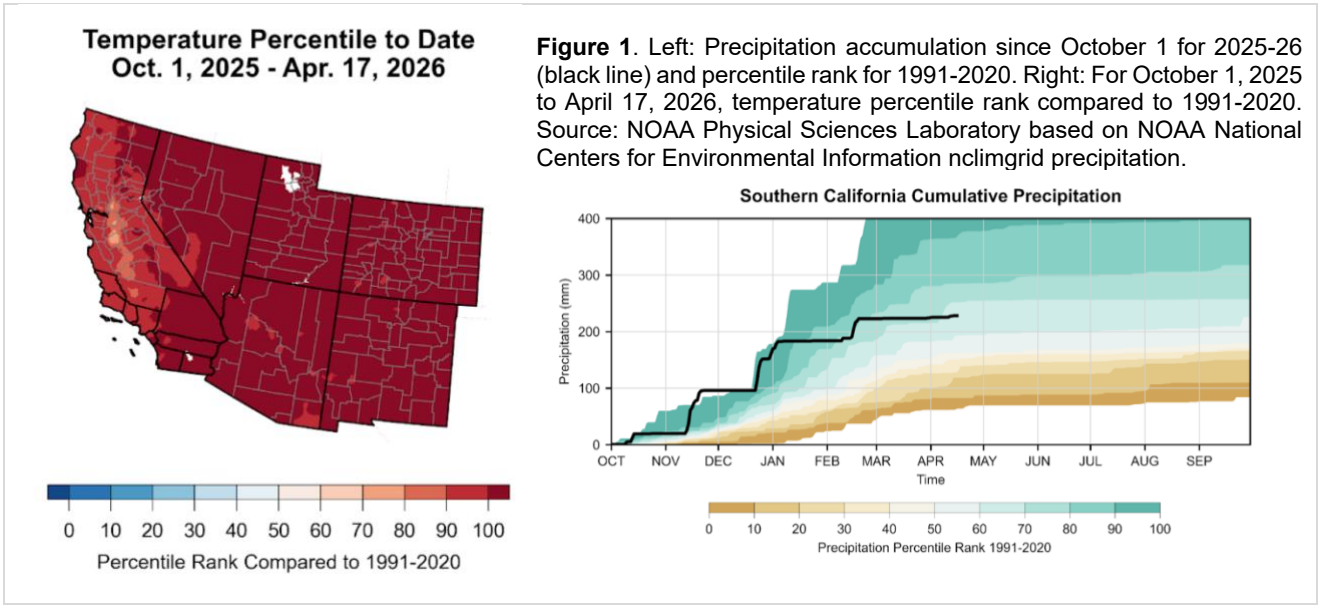

Figure 1. Left: Precipitation accumulation since October 1 for 2025-26 (black line) and percentile rank for 1991-2020. Right: For October 1, 2025 to April 17, 2026, temperature percentile rank compared to 1991-2020. Source: NOAA Physical Sciences Laboratory based on NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information nclimgrid precipitation.

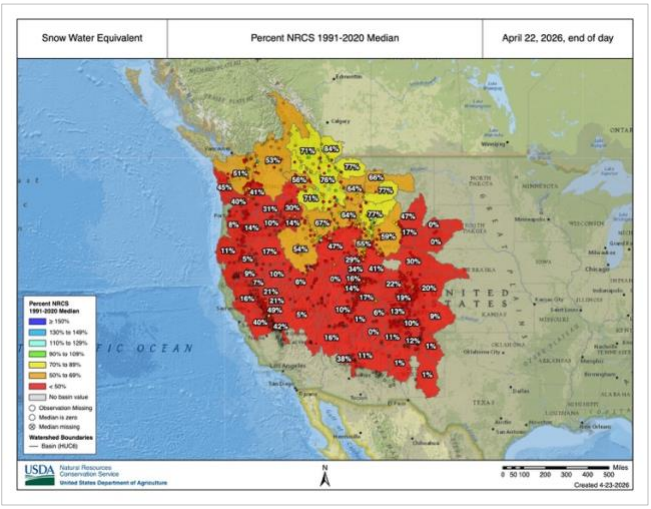

Figure 2. (left) Percent of median snow water volume as of April 22, 2026. Source: USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

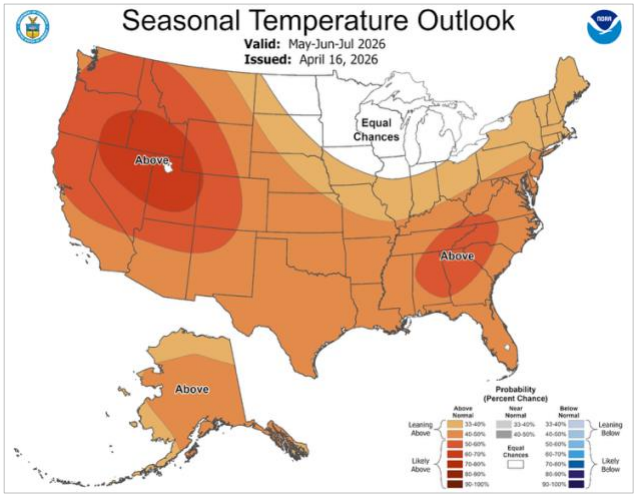

Figure 3. Probabilistic temperature outlooks for (left) May-July 2026 issued on April 16, 2026 by the NOAA Climate Prediction Center.