May 2026 Southern California Sector-Specific Drought Outlook Pilot

Current Drought

Abnormal Dryness (D0) is building in Southern California[1], as very little precipitation was observed since mid-February 2026 amid periods of unprecedented heat (Fig. 1). Moderate, Severe, Extreme, and Exceptional Drought (D1-D4) persist across much of the Southwest U.S., 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. Snow water equivalent (the volume of water stored in snow) was exceptionally low throughout the 2025-2026 cold season due to below-average precipitation since October 1, 2025 and exceptional temperatures (Fig. 2). For much of the cold season, snow water equivalent in the Upper Colorado Region was far below the prior record low. It peaked three weeks ahead of schedule at only 50% of the typical volume.

Drought Outlook and Predictability

The Southwest United States is expected to experience above-average temperatures through summer 2026 (Fig. 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 are expected to be average or above average in California through 2026, but will decline with increased use in mid- and late 2026 (high confidence).
Limited water supply remains a possibility because the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation plans to release less water from Lakes Powell and Mead in the 2026 Water Year (medium confidence).

Public Health

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

Agriculture

Less water may be available for irrigated agriculture in 2026 and 2027, which would reduce agricultural productivity (medium confidence).
Above-normal temperatures and periods of extreme heat are likely to affect agricultural workers, decreasing their productivity (high confidence).

[1] 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 May 28, 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.

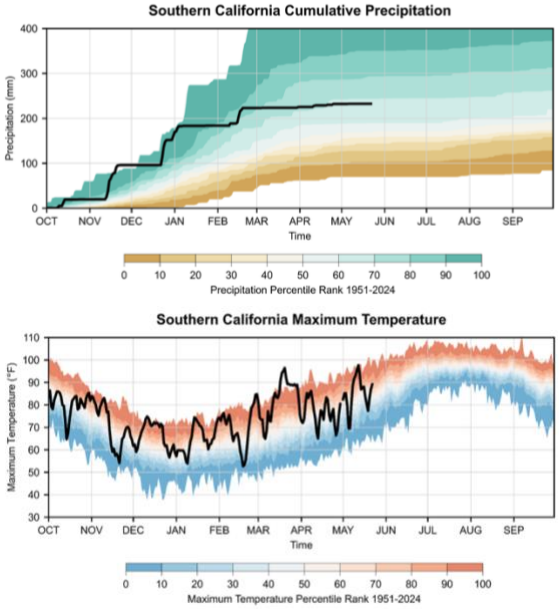

Figure 1, above. Top: Precipitation accumulation since October 1 for 2025-26 (black line) and percentile rank for 1991-2020. Bottom: Maximum temperature for 2025-26 (black line) and percentile rank for 1991-2020. Source: NOAA Physical Sciences Laboratory based on NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information nclimgrid precipitation.

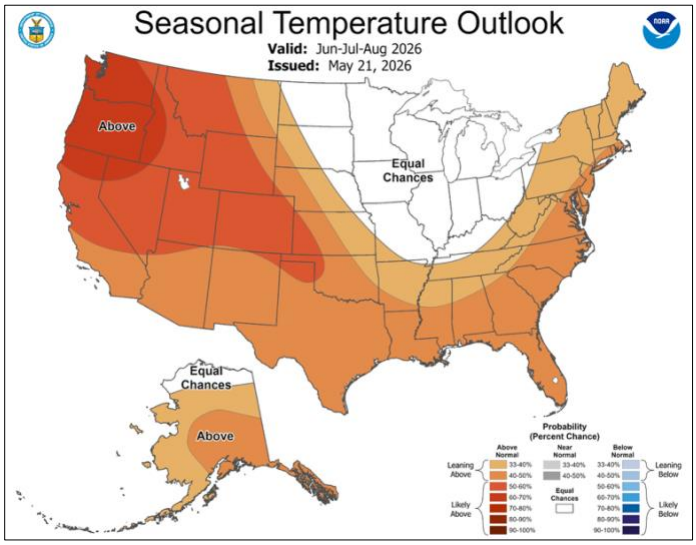

Figure 3, above. Probabilistic temperature outlooks for June-August 2026 issued on May 21, 2026 by the NOAA Climate Prediction Center.

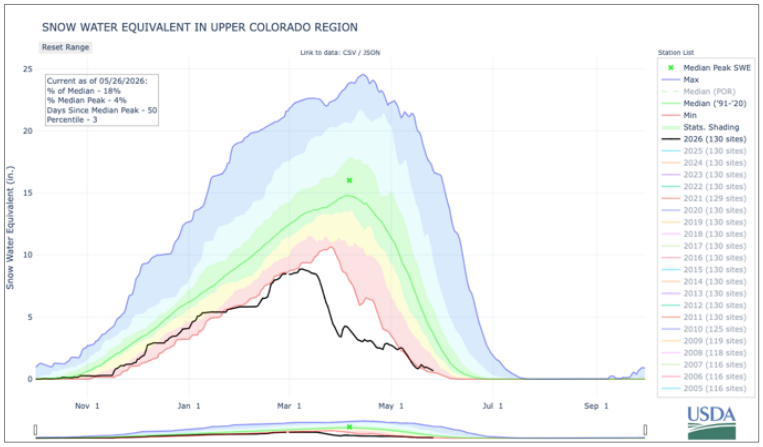

Figure 2, left. Time series of snow water equivalent since October 1 in inches in the Upper Colorado Region during 2025-2026 (black line) and historical conditions since 1991-2020. Red indicates the 0-10th percentile, yellow indicates the 10-30th percentile, green indicates the 30-70th percentile, light blue indicates the 70-90th percentile, and dark blue indicates the 90-100th percentile. Source: USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.