# May 2026: Southwest Climate Outlook

**Stacie Reece**
May 28, 2026

https://climas.arizona.edu/

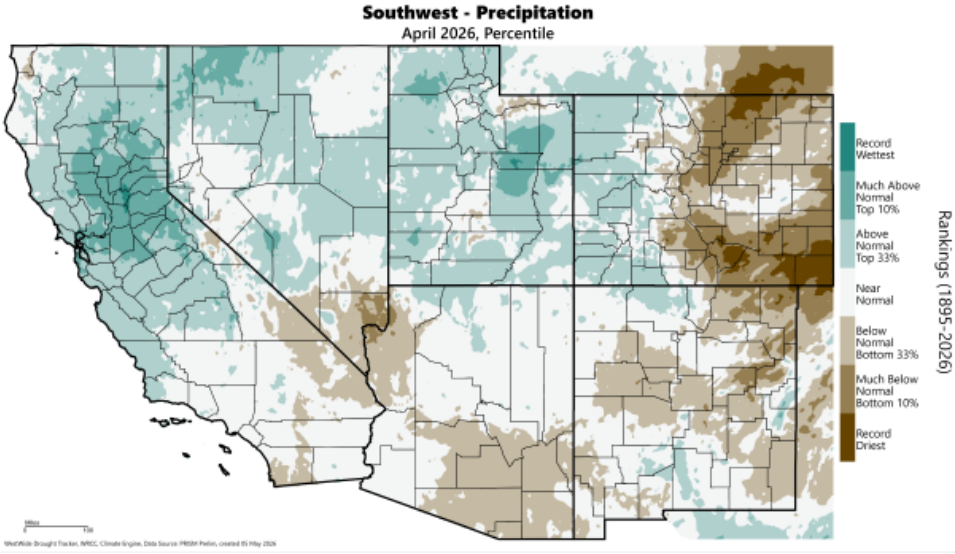
The Southwest Climate Outlook is published by the Climate Assessment for the Southwest (CLIMAS), with support from University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, and the New Mexico State Climate office.

*Questions/Contact: Stacie Reece, sreece@arizona.edu*

## Precipitation and Temperature

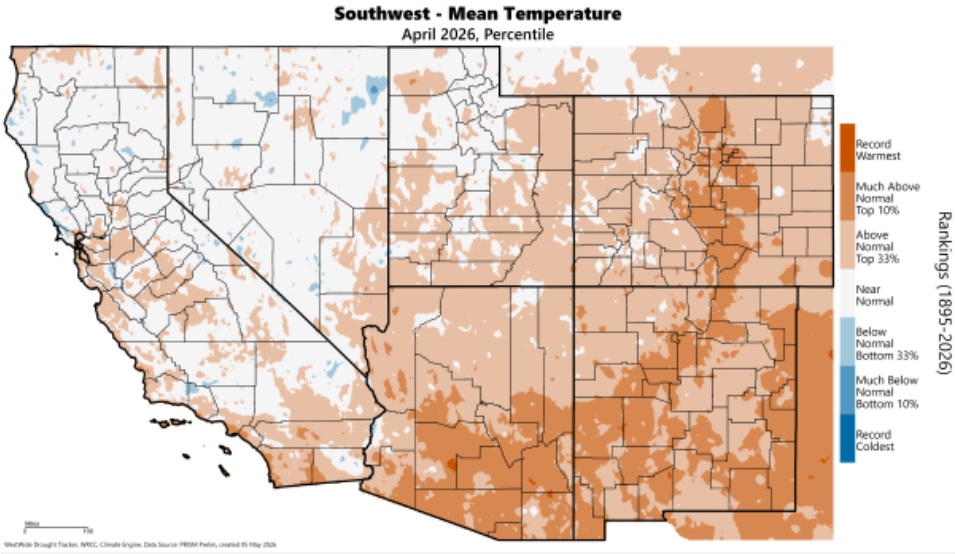
April precipitation totals for Arizona and New Mexico were generally either near normal or below normal, depending on

location. Precipitation was above normal for only a few areas scattered across the region.




Source: WestWide Drought Tracker

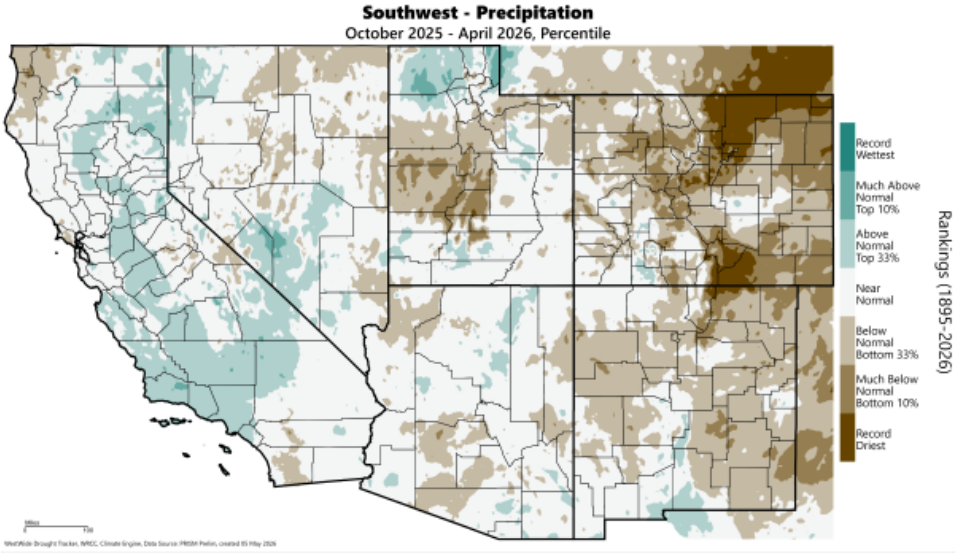
April temperatures averaged above normal to much-above normal across Arizona and New Mexico.




Source: WestWide Drought Tracker

Water year precipitation totals through April (October 2025–April 2026) are near normal for much of Arizona and below normal for much of New Mexico—notably so for the Sangre de Cristo mountains, where totals are much-below normal,

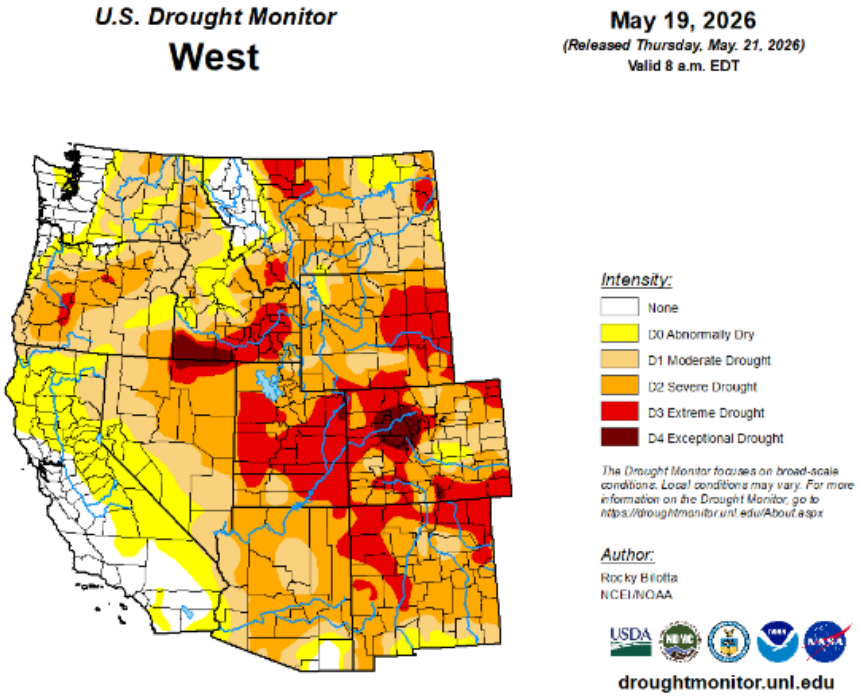
falling in the bottom one-tenth of the rankings across all years on record.




Source: WestWide Drought Tracker

## Drought

Drought conditions are widespread in Arizona and New Mexico. Drought conditions are classified Severe (D2) or worse for 80% of New Mexico, by area; over one-quarter of the state is classified under Extreme (D3) drought. The area of Extreme drought extends into northeastern Arizona; 90% of Arizona's area is classified under Moderate (D1) drought or worse—Severe drought classification covers 60% of the state.




Source: U.S. Drought Monitor

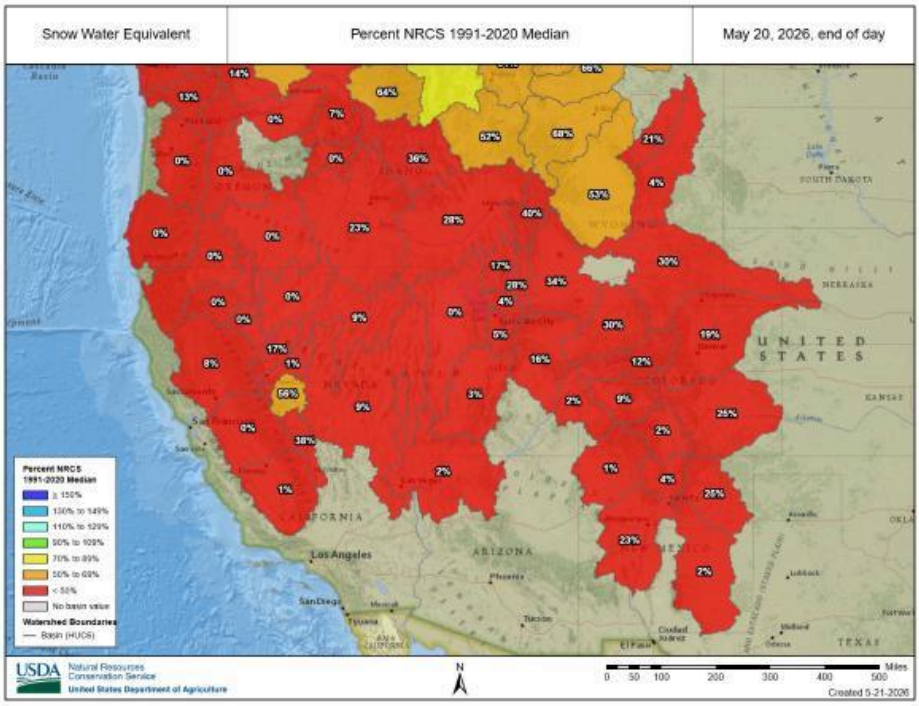
**NIDIS Improved and Expanded State Pages on Drought.Gov**

New Mexico

Arizona

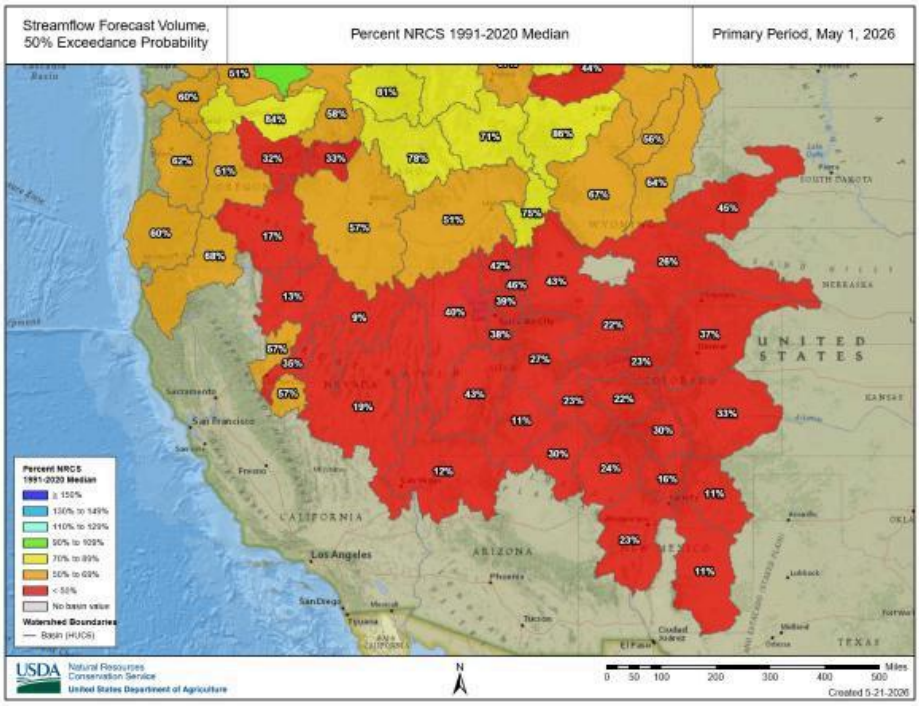
## Snowpack & Streamflow

Snowpack levels are far below normal across the western U.S. Only a subset the high-elevation stations in Arizona and New Mexico have a “normal” to compare against this time of year, but among those, current snow water equivalent (SWE) ranges from 25% to 1% of normal. Rio Grande headwaters SWE is 2% of normal, and basin-averaged Upper Colorado River Basin SWE is 20% of normal.




USDA:  Natural Resources Conservation Service

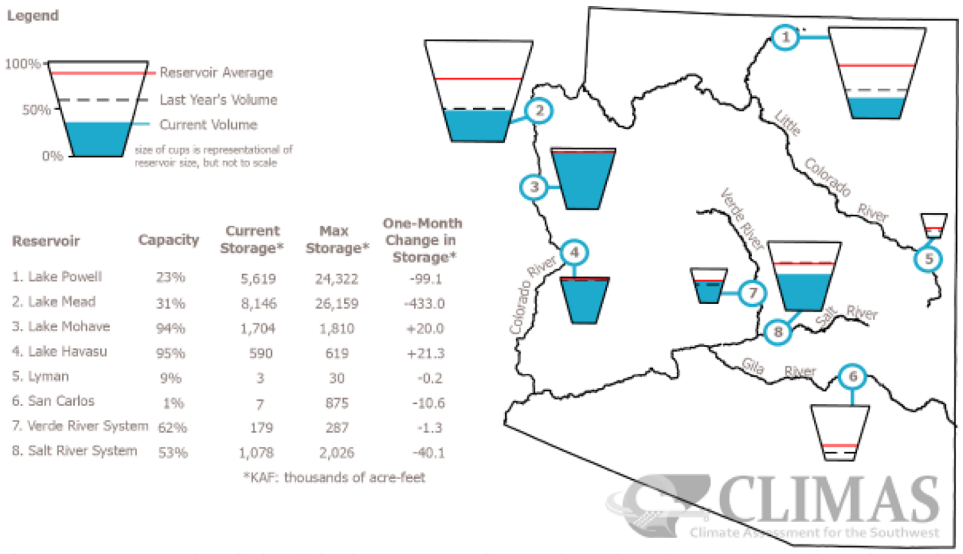
With such poor snowpack conditions through the winter, below normal streamflow is expected for basins across the western U.S. Upper Colorado River Basin streamflow volume is expected to be 24% of normal. Rio Grande headwaters streamflow is expected to be 30% of normal.




USDA:  Natural Resources Conservation Service

## Water Supply

Many reservoirs in Arizona have been affected by drought, including San Carlos reservoir on the Gila River, which is down to 1% of its maximum capacity. Salt River system reservoirs are down compared to last year and compared to the long-term average. Lake Powell and Lake Mead are also down compared to last year. Because Lake Powell is in danger of becoming so depleted this year that the dam would no longer operate safely, the federal government ordered the release of up to 1 million acre-feet of water from Flaming Gorge reservoir upstream on the Green River in Wyoming and Utah, along with orders for reduced releases from Powell to downstream users.

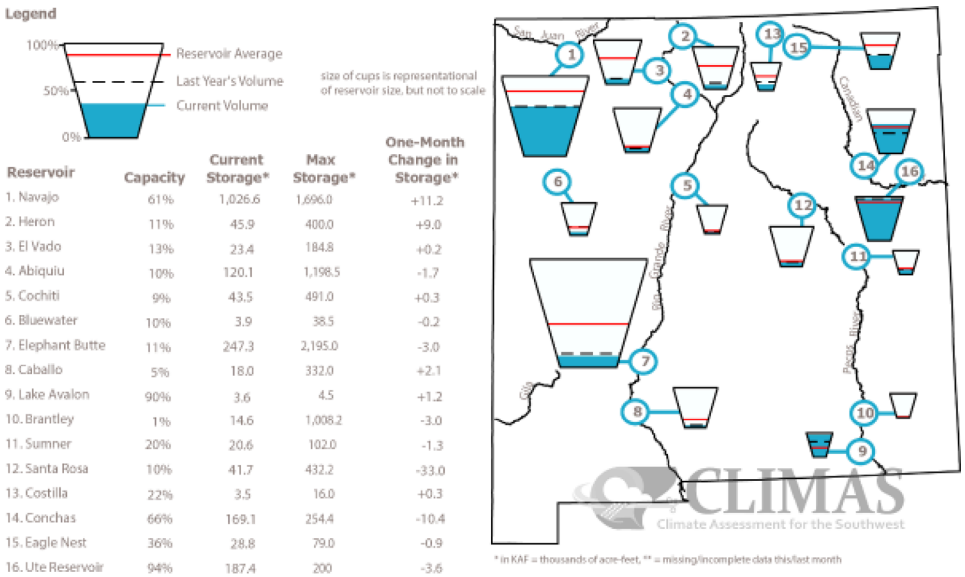



| Reservoir | Capacity | Current Storage* | Max Storage* | One-Month Change in Storage* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Lake Powell | 23% | 5,619 | 24,322 | -99.1 |
| 2. Lake Mead | 31% | 8,146 | 26,159 | -433.0 |
| 3. Lake Mohave | 94% | 1,704 | 1,810 | +20.0 |
| 4. Lake Havasu | 95% | 590 | 619 | +21.3 |
| 5. Lyman | 9% | 3 | 30 | -0.2 |
| 6. San Carlos | 1% | 7 | 875 | -10.6 |
| 7. Verde River System | 62% | 179 | 287 | -1.3 |
| 8. Salt River System | 53% | 1,078 | 2,026 | -40.1 |

*KAF: thousands of acre-feet

**Figure 1.** Arizona reservoir volumes for the end of April 2026 as a percent of capacity. The map depicts the average volume and last year's storage for each reservoir. The table also lists current and maximum storage, and change in storage since last month.

New Mexico reservoir storage is similarly affected by drought, with below-average volumes held in reservoirs of the Rio Grande basin and areas to the west, although reservoirs in the eastern part of the state are generally holding above-average volumes.




| Reservoir | Capacity | Current Storage* | Max Storage* | One-Month Change in Storage* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Navajo | 61% | 1,026.6 | 1,696.0 | +11.2 |
| 2. Heron | 11% | 45.9 | 400.0 | +9.0 |
| 3. El Vado | 13% | 23.4 | 184.8 | +0.2 |
| 4. Abiquiu | 10% | 120.1 | 1,198.5 | -1.7 |
| 5. Cochiti | 9% | 43.5 | 491.0 | +0.3 |
| 6. Bluewater | 10% | 3.9 | 38.5 | -0.2 |
| 7. Elephant Butte | 11% | 247.3 | 2,195.0 | -3.0 |
| 8. Caballo | 5% | 18.0 | 332.0 | +2.1 |
| 9. Lake Avalon | 90% | 3.6 | 4.5 | +1.2 |
| 10. Brantley | 1% | 14.6 | 1,008.2 | -3.0 |
| 11. Sumner | 20% | 20.6 | 102.0 | -1.3 |
| 12. Santa Rosa | 10% | 41.7 | 432.2 | -33.0 |
| 13. Costilla | 22% | 3.5 | 16.0 | +0.3 |
| 14. Conchas | 66% | 169.1 | 254.4 | -10.4 |
| 15. Eagle Nest | 36% | 28.8 | 79.0 | -0.9 |
| 16. Ute Reservoir | 94% | 187.4 | 200 | -3.6 |

**Figure 2.** New Mexico reservoir volumes for end of April 2026 as a percent of capacity. The map depicts the average volume and last year's storage for each reservoir. The table also lists current and maximum storage, and change in storage since last month.

*The map gives a representation of current storage for reservoirs in Arizona and New Mexico. Reservoir locations are numbered within the blue circles on the map, corresponding to the reservoirs listed in the table. The cup next to each reservoir shows the current storage (blue fill) as a percent of total capacity. Note that while the size of each cup varies with the size of the*

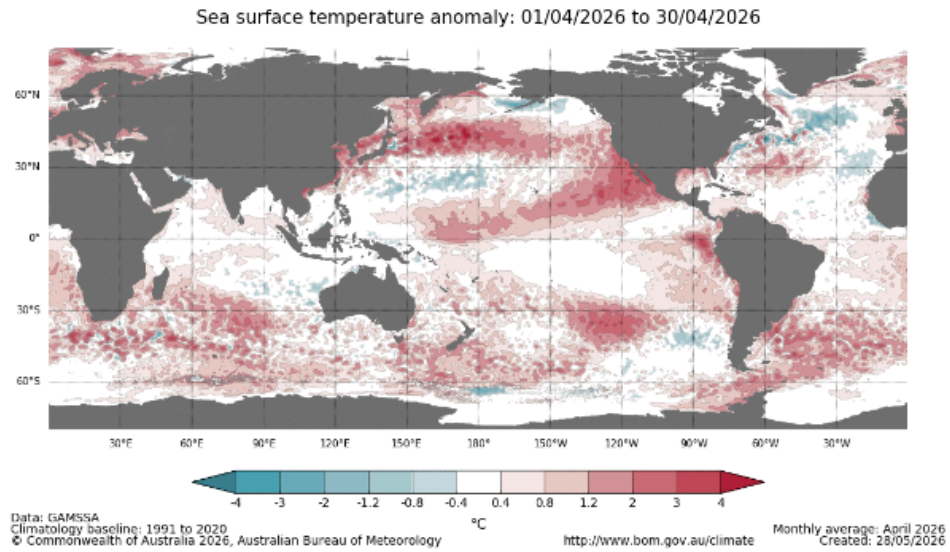
*reservoir, these are representational and not to scale. Each cup also represents last year's storage (dotted line) and the 1991–2020 reservoir average (red line). The table details more exactly the current capacity (listed as a percent of maximum storage). Current and maximum storage are given in thousands of acre-feet for each reservoir. One acre-foot is the volume of water sufficient to cover an acre of land to a depth of 1 foot (approximately 325,851 gallons). On average, 1 acre-foot of water is enough to meet the demands of four people for a year. The last column of the table lists an increase or decrease in storage since last month. A line indicates no change. These data are based on reservoir reports updated monthly by the Natural Resources Conservation Service - National Water and Climate Center (USDA)*

.

**BOR: New Mexico Dashboard**

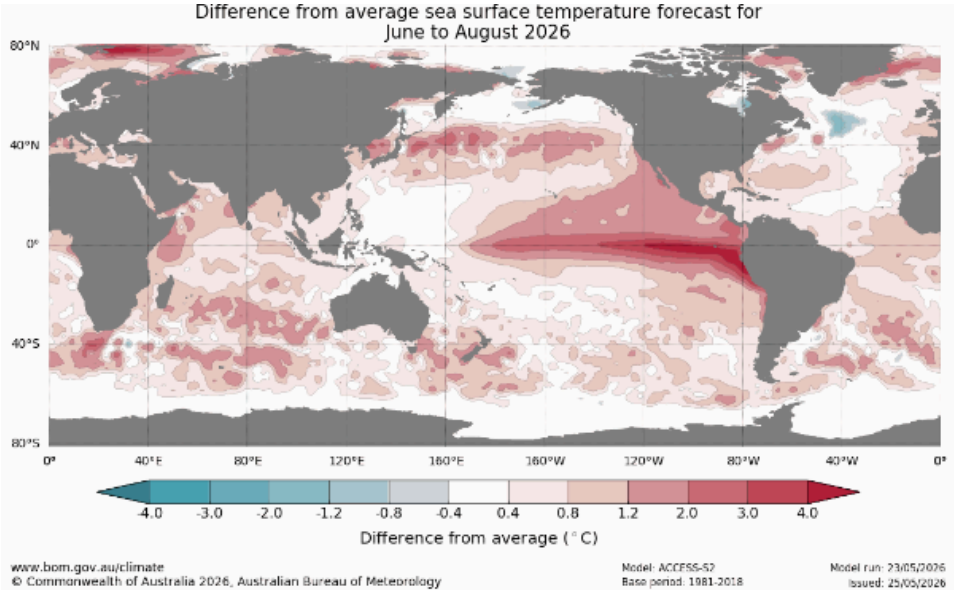
## ENSO Tracker

April sea-surface temperatures (SSTs) showed signs of developing El Niño conditions—warmer-than-average SSTs along the equator in the eastern and central Pacific. The anomalously warm waters off the western coast of Mexico are not a part of the developing El Niño but may affect seasonal climate in the Southwest via increased tropical cyclone activity.



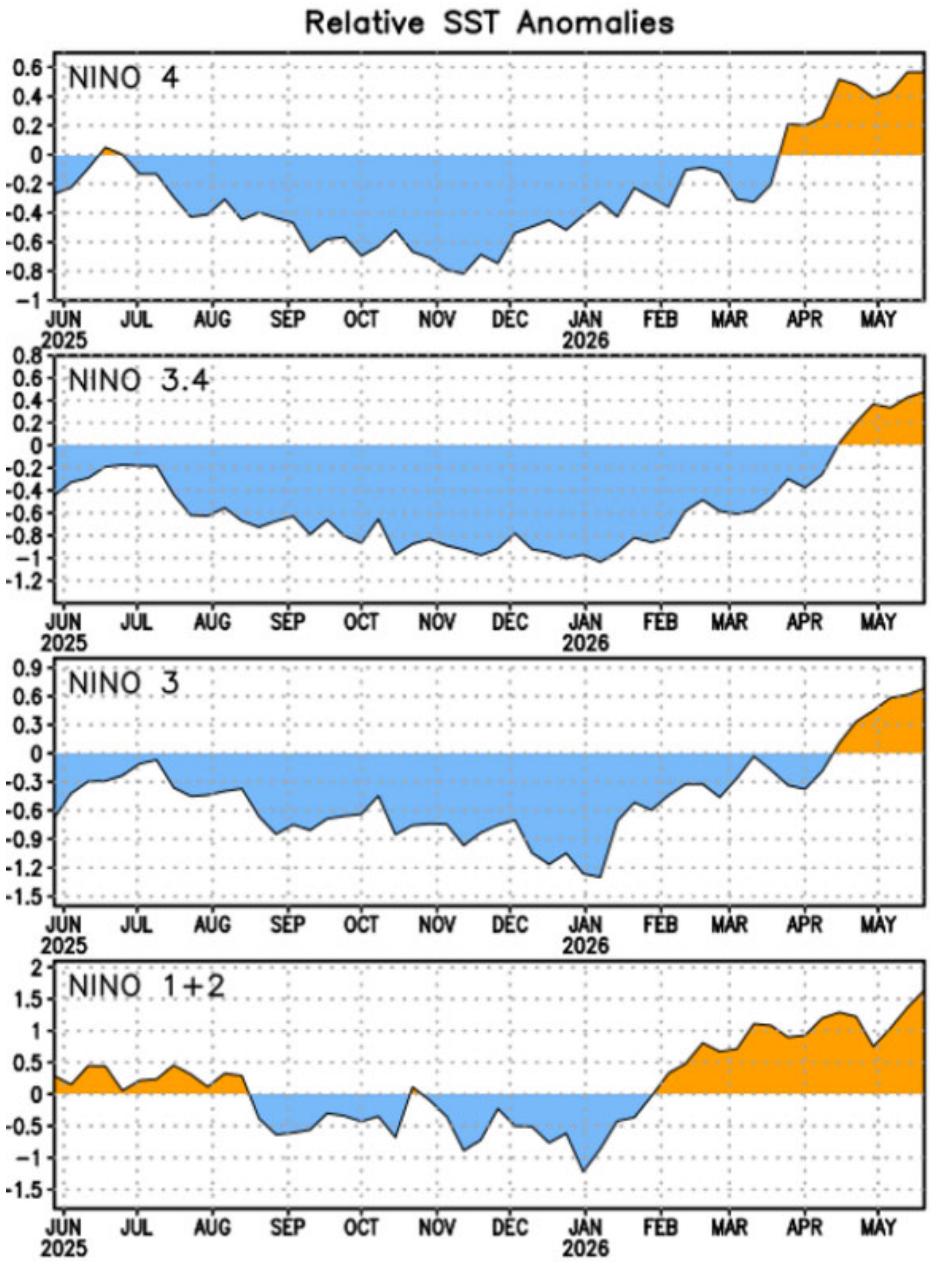

Source: Australian Bureau of Meteorology

The June–August SST forecast from the Australian ACCESS model shows El Niño in full swing—SSTs 2°C above average or greater, stretching along the equator from the western coast of South America to the international date line (180° longitude). The ACCESS model is likely overestimating the strength of El Niño at this forecast window—it is the hottest model out of all forecasts shown in the model plume figure further down below—but all models predict El Niño conditions by the June–August window.




Source: Australian Bureau of Meteorology

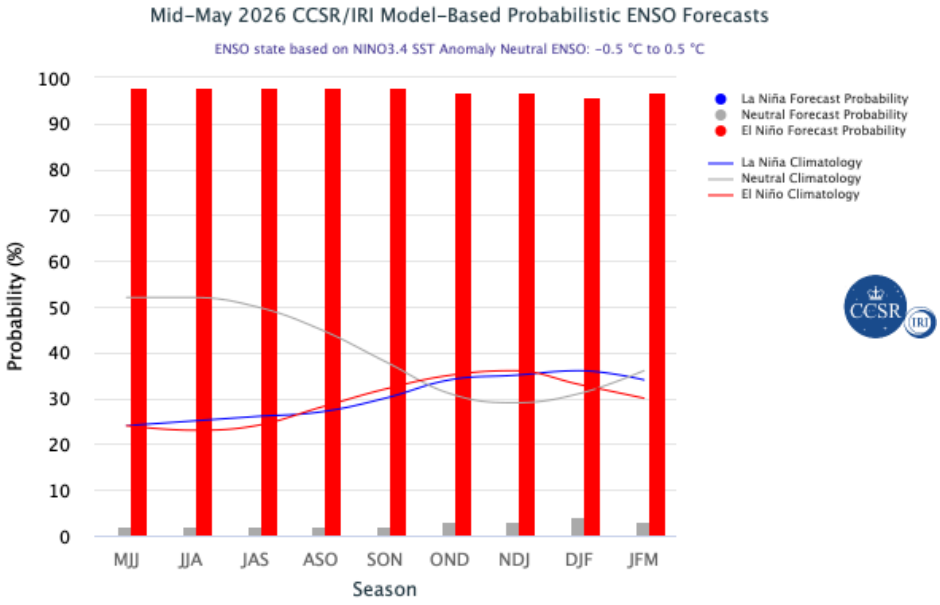
In late May, weekly-average SSTs crossed the threshold criteria for El Niño conditions—SSTs warmer than 0.5°C above average in the Nino 3.4 monitoring region. SSTs are trending warm across all the equatorial Pacific monitoring regions, from Nino 4 in the central Pacific to Nino 1+2 at the eastern edge of the Pacific.




Source: Climate Prediction Center (NOAA)

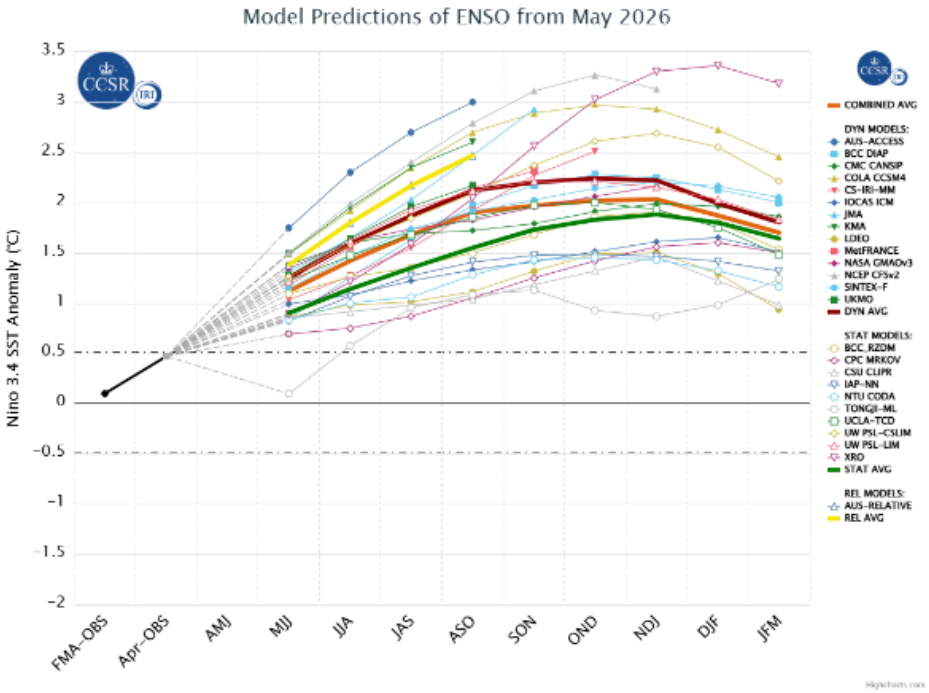
ENSO forecasts indicate El Niño conditions are almost certain for all seasonal forecast windows, starting with the May–July window (MJJ), through to the January–March window (JFM),

with probabilities over 95% chance across all seasonal windows.




Source: The International Research Institute for Climate and Society, Columbia University Climate School

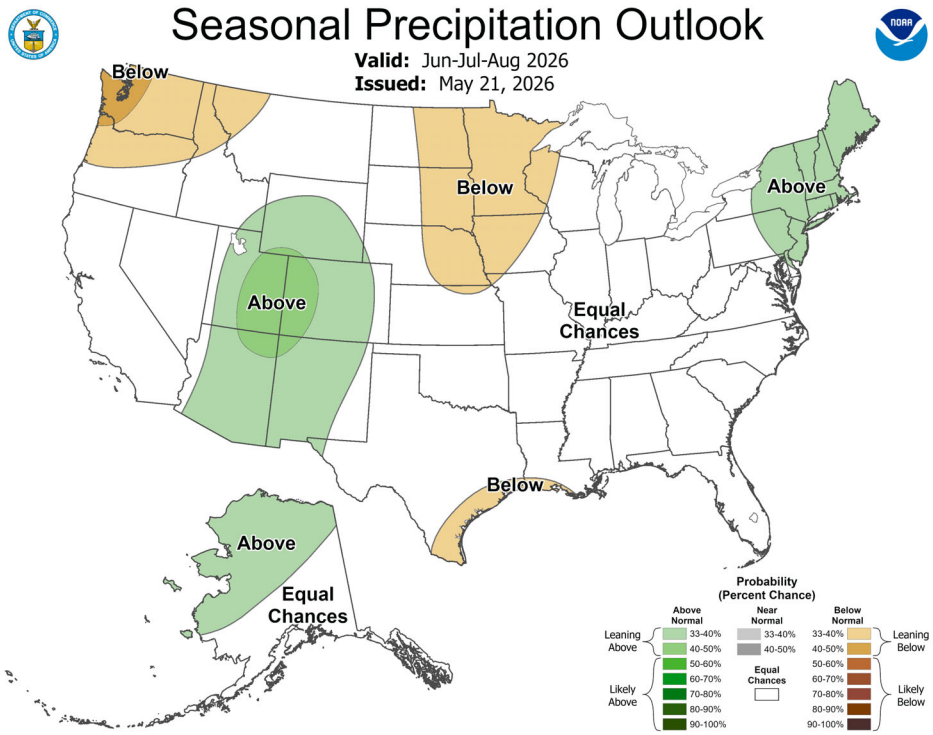
Individual models differ with respect to the predicted strength of El Niño, but they all predict El Niño conditions, and all but one outlier predict strengthening of El Niño conditions that reach peak intensity in the fall or winter. If that forecast bears out, it will mean increased chances of a wetter, cooler-than-otherwise-expected fall–spring in the Southwest.




Source: The International Research Institute for Climate and Society, Columbia University Climate School

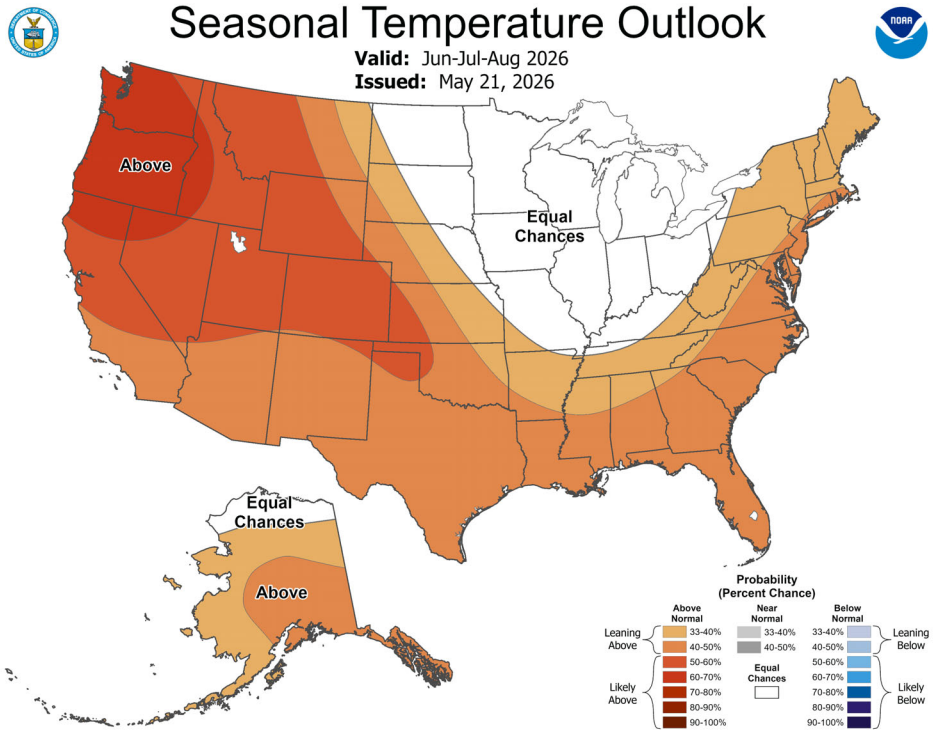
## Seasonal Forecasts

The June–August seasonal precipitation forecast leans toward above-normal precipitation for much of Arizona and New Mexico, giving a 33–50% chance of seasonal precipitation ranking among the upper one-third of totals in the historical record.




Source: Climate Prediction Center (NOAA)

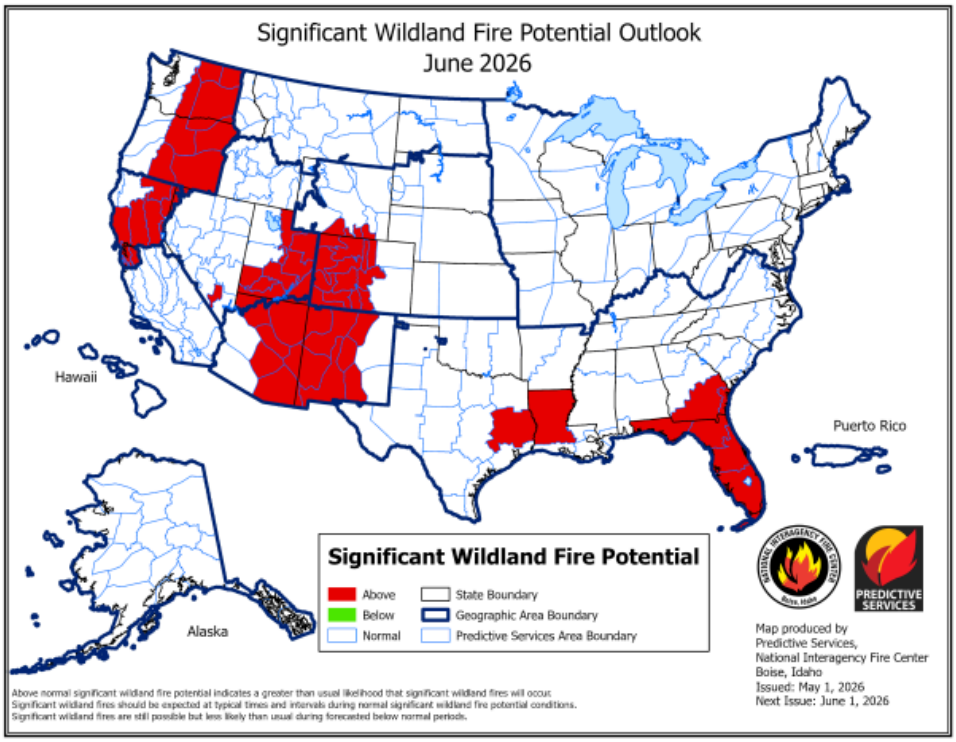
The June–August seasonal temperature forecast leans toward above-normal temperatures for Arizona and New Mexico.




Source: Climate Prediction Center (NOAA)

## Wildfire

Potential for significant wildland fire is expected to be above normal through June for much of Arizona and New Mexico. Below normal precipitation and record high temperatures over the winter have contributed to drier soils and vegetative fuels. Fire potential is expected to be normal for western Arizona and eastern New Mexico.




Source: National Interagency Coordination Center

## Southwest Climate Podcast

### May 2026 SW Climate Podcast - Super? Mega? Weird: El Niño & Monsoon

*Recorded 05/15/2026, Aired 05/19/2026*

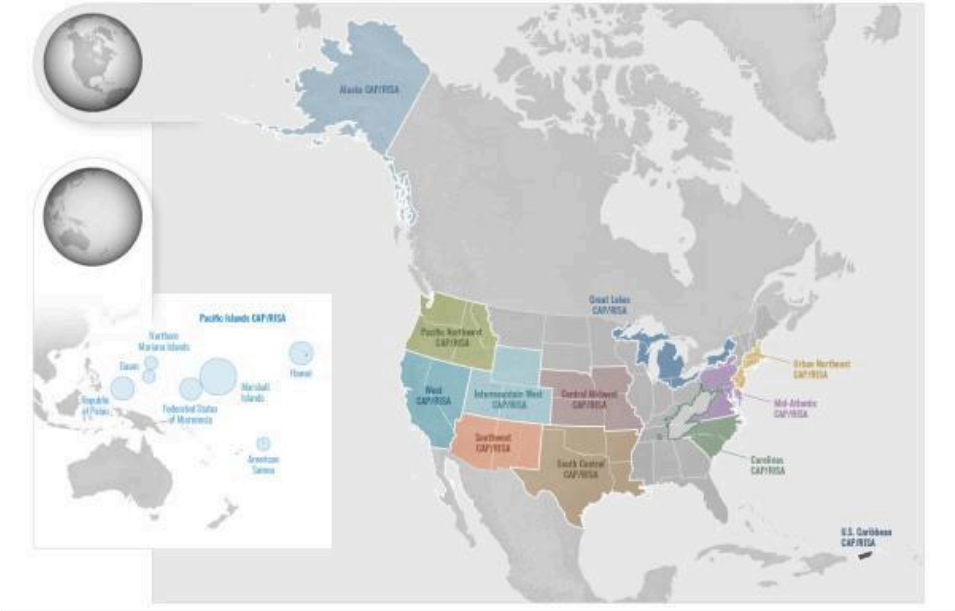

In this month's Southwest Climate Podcast, hosts Zack Guido and Mike Crimmins answer what a strong El Niño could mean for the monsoon. They do a quick recap of the first half of May. And then it's off to the races with a look at: sea surface temperatures in the Pacific, ONI vs. RONI, ENSO's scientific history, monsoon and its interaction with East Pacific tropical activity, then finally a winter preview. Should be a fun and interesting few seasons to watch unfold!

Also, Zack gives a plug for the Monsoon Fantasy Forecast Game which will include a new weekly tournament feature this year.

## Listen Here

## About CLIMAS

The Climate Assessment for the Southwest (CLIMAS) program was established in 1998 as part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Regional Integrated Sciences and Assessments (RISA) Program. CLIMAS—housed at the University of Arizona's Institute of the Environment—is a collaboration between the University of Arizona and New Mexico State University. The CLIMAS team is made up of experts from a variety of social, physical, and natural sciences who work with partners across the Southwest to develop sustainable answers to regional climate challenges.




Learn more about the NOAA RISA program here


## Disclaimer

This packet contains official and non-official forecasts, as well as other information. While we make every effort to verify this information, please understand that we do not warrant the accuracy of any of these materials. The user assumes the entire risk related to the use of this data. CLIMAS, and UA Cooperative Extension disclaim any and all warranties, whether expressed or implied, including (without limitation) any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. In no

event will CLIMAS, UA Cooperative Extension, or The University of Arizona be liable to you or to any third party for any direct, indirect, incidental, consequential, special or exemplary damages or lost profit resulting from any use or misuse of this data.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Southwest Climate Outlook contributors:** | Mike Crimmins & Matt Meko |