

Santa Cruz Basin Seasonal Climate Bulletin

May 2026

Data Available as of May 14, 2026

Given increasing climate variability in recent years, including weather patterns distinct from that of our ancestors, our team gathered around a question raised by basin leaders, “**how do we get the best climate data to inform our water management and agricultural decisions?**”. The climate information in this report was tailored to inform the water management decisions being made in the Santa Cruz basin by acequias and Santa Cruz Irrigation District (SCID) with as much geographically specific data as possible.

Highlights—May 2026

- **Record-low snowpack** in April resulted from accelerated melting during exceptionally high temperatures in March. Peak snowpack was also below normal because of precipitation shortfalls and above-normal temperatures through winter.
- **February–April average temperatures were the warmest on record for the Santa Cruz region and much of New Mexico.** April temperatures were less extreme than March, but still above normal.
- **Seasonal forecasts for the upcoming months lean toward wetter-than-normal** and warmer-than-normal conditions.
- **Longer-term forecasts** indicate El Niño conditions are likely to develop before next fall, which would mean greater chances of above-normal precipitation and below-normal temperatures in fall 2026–spring 2027.

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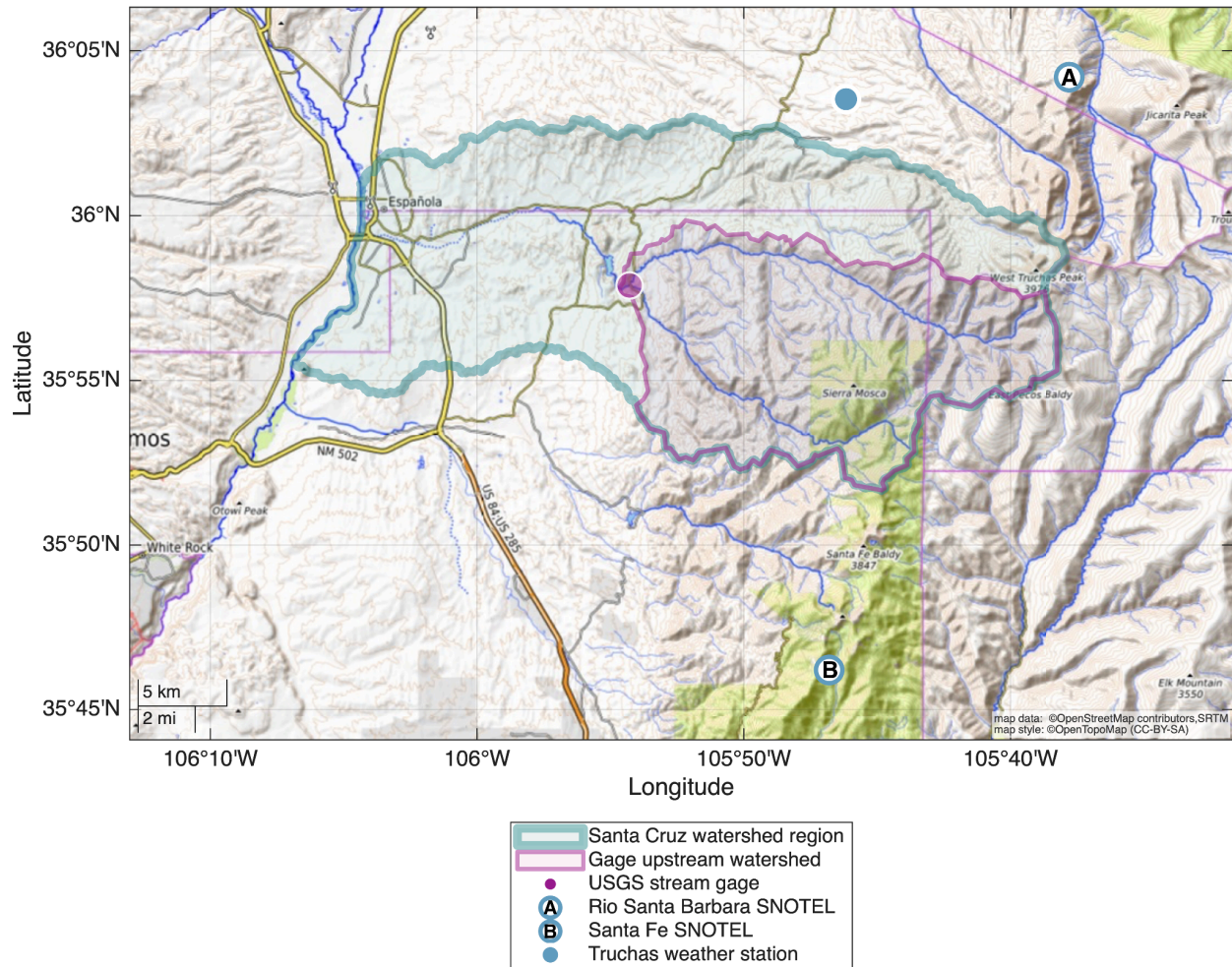
A special thanks for the leadership and insights of the:

**Santa Cruz Irrigation District,
Rio Quemado, Rio en Medio, Rio Frijoles, Rio Santa Cruz Stream Systems Acequia Association,
and Greenroots Institute**

These entities shared the relevant questions, data points and feedback to make this report viable.

Santa Cruz Region

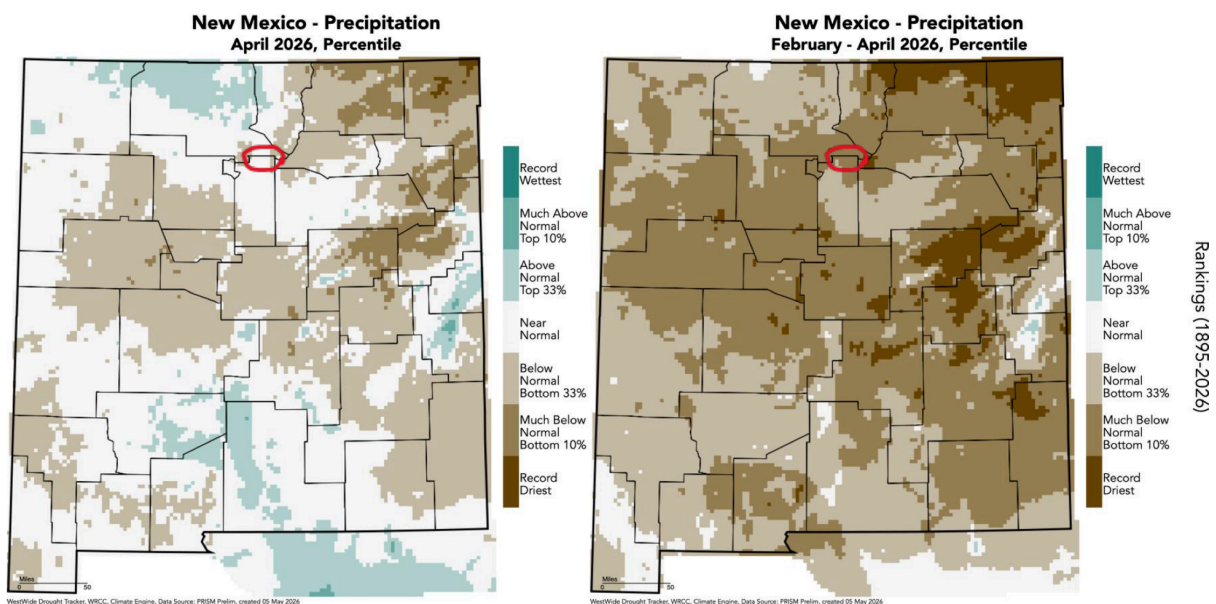
The map below shows the extent of the Santa Cruz watershed region and the locations of stations providing data for this bulletin: USGS stream gauge (contributing watershed also shown); snow telemetry (SNOTEL) stations at the Rio Santa Barbara, Santa Fe, and Tres Ritos sites; and the Truchas weather station.



The Truchas weather station, and the Santa Fe and Rio Santa Barbara snow telemetry (SNOTEL) stations are located outside of the Santa Cruz catchment area, but they are close enough to capture information that reflects conditions within the catchment.

Precipitation

Recent precipitation influences expected flow into the Santa Cruz reservoir, availability for releases, streamflow, and soil moisture. The maps below show how recent monthly and three-month precipitation totals compared against past years in the climate record. **Areas colored white had near-normal precipitation** (totals ranking among the middle third the rankings), **areas colored brown had below-normal precipitation** (in the bottom third of the rankings), **green areas indicate above-normal precipitation** (in the upper third of the rankings), and **darker shades indicate totals closer to either extreme of the rankings**. The table below lists the monthly and three-month totals measured at nearby stations, and also lists the total for the current water year (October–September) in progress.



Station Observed Precipitation						
Station	April total	April % of normal	February–April total	February–April % of normal	Water year (Oct 2025–Apr 2026) total	Water year % of normal
Truchas	0.8 in.	50%	1.2 in.	28%	5.4 in.	50%
Santa Fe SNOTEL	2.0 in.	87%	3.8 in.	53%	11.7 in.	58%
Rio Santa Barbara SNOTEL	1.9 in.	-	3.0 in.	-	9.8 in.	-

April: 0.8 inches of rain at the Truchas weather station.

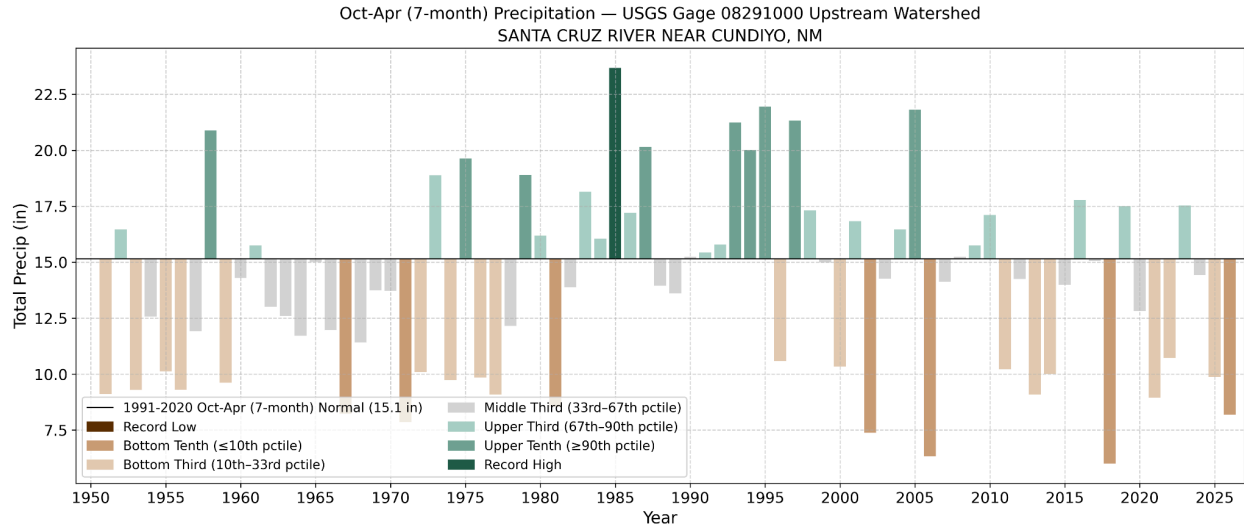
April precipitation within the Santa Cruz region ranged from near normal to below normal depending on location, with precipitation at gauged sites ranging from 50 percent of normal to 87 percent of normal April totals.

Water year to date: 5.4 inches of rain at the Truchas weather station.

Total precipitation for the water year so far ranged from 50 percent of normal for the Truchas weather station to 58 percent of normal for the Santa Fe SNOTEL site.

Historical context: precipitation

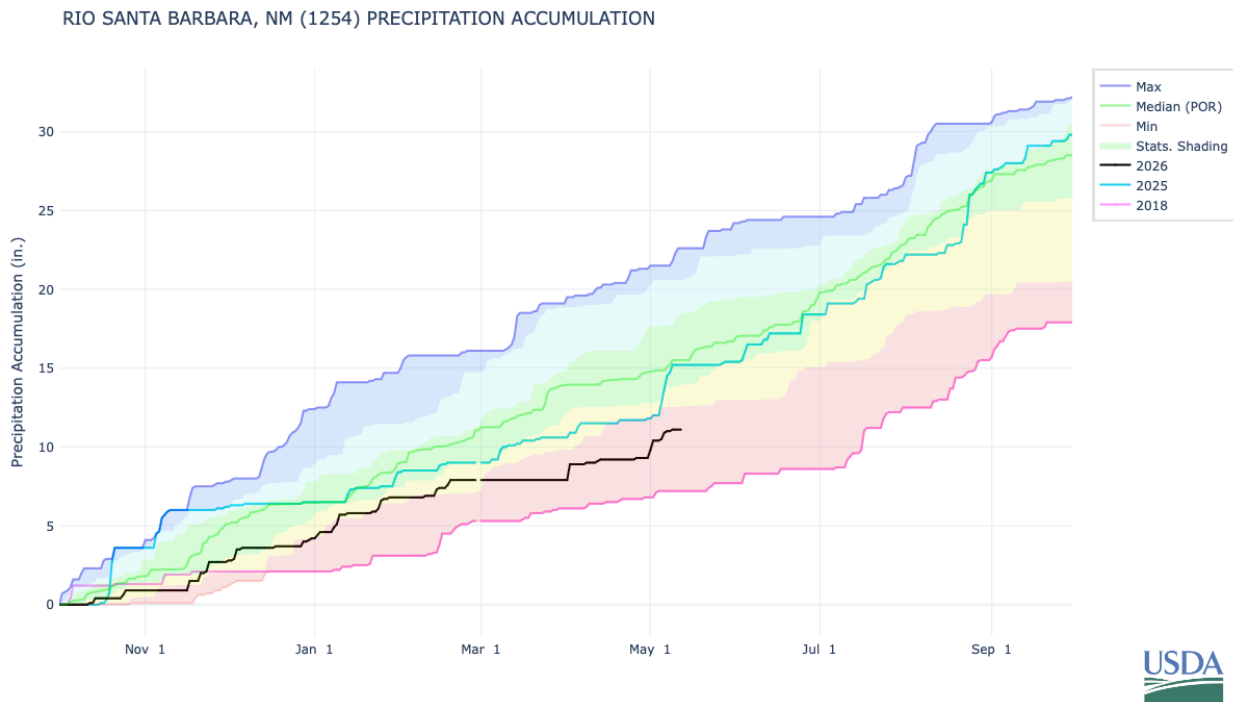
The chart below shows water-year-so-far (October–April) precipitation totals for each year, 1950–2026. The values are plotted relative to the long-term (1991–2020) median. Colors highlight whether precipitation was *near normal*, *below normal*, *above normal*, *much-below normal*, *much-above normal*, a *record low*, or a *record high*. Values represent a spatial average of precipitation within the Santa Cruz catchment area above the streamgage.



Regional-average total precipitation October–April 2026 was much below normal, but not as much so as in 2018. In the last 20 years, above-normal totals have been relatively rare. The same is true for the 1950s and 1960s, but in the intervening decades (e.g. 1980–2000), totals tended to be above normal.

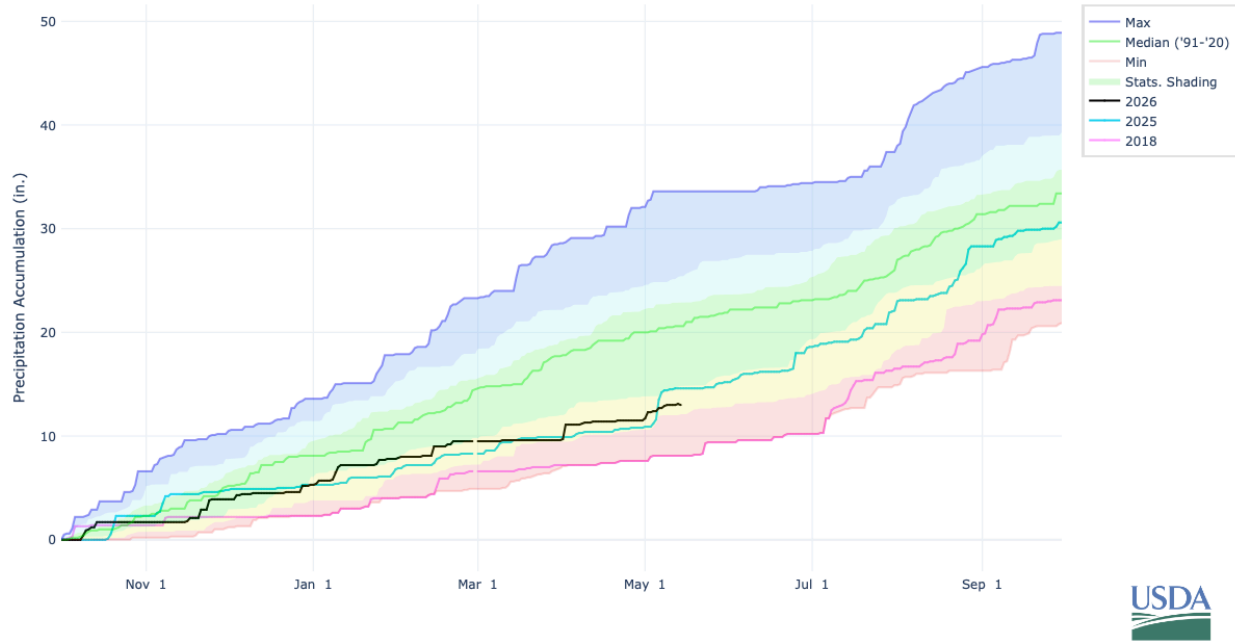
Precipitation progress over the water year (SNOTEL)

The Rio Santa Barbara and Santa Fe SNOTEL stations are the nearest snowpack-measurement sites relative to the Santa Cruz watershed. SNOTEL sites record precipitation year-round, in addition to tracking snowpack over winter. The plots below show daily precipitation accumulation over the course of the water year (beginning in October), and how it compares to the range of values for daily accumulated precipitation for all years in the record of observations—from the **record minimum (red line)** to the **record maximum (dark blue line)**. The **green line shows the median, or normal, accumulated precipitation**, and values falling within the green shading are considered near normal.



Total precipitation since October at the Rio Santa Barbara SNOTEL site is much below normal for this time of year (black line). As of May 12, water-year total precipitation was 72% of normal for that date.

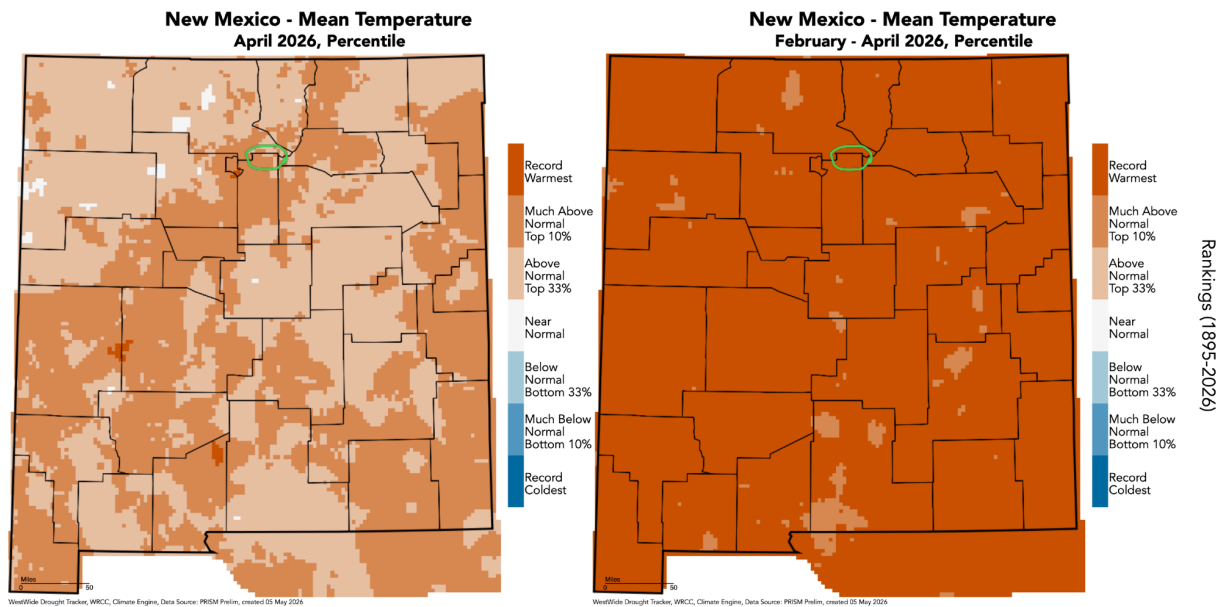
SANTA FE, NM (922) PRECIPITATION ACCUMULATION



Water year precipitation accumulation at Santa Fe SNOTEL station was within the range considered to be near normal (**green shading**) in mid-January after a significant precipitation event in early January, but since then, the total accumulation has generally been below normal (yellow shading, or falling in the bottom 30% of the records for the corresponding date).

Temperature

Seasonal temperature can influence water availability in several ways—greater evaporation and plant water use in the upstream watershed can mean less water makes its way into streams; evaporation, in the form of increased atmospheric water demand, also affects irrigation efficiency. In winter, temperatures influence the persistence of snowpack and the timing of snow melt. The maps below show how recent monthly and water-year average temperatures compare against past years in the climate record—**areas colored white had near-normal temperatures** (ranking among the middle third the rankings), **areas colored blue had below-normal temperatures** (in the bottom third of the rankings), **orange-red areas indicate above-normal temperatures** (in the upper third of the rankings), and **darker shades indicate temperatures closer to either extreme of the rankings**.

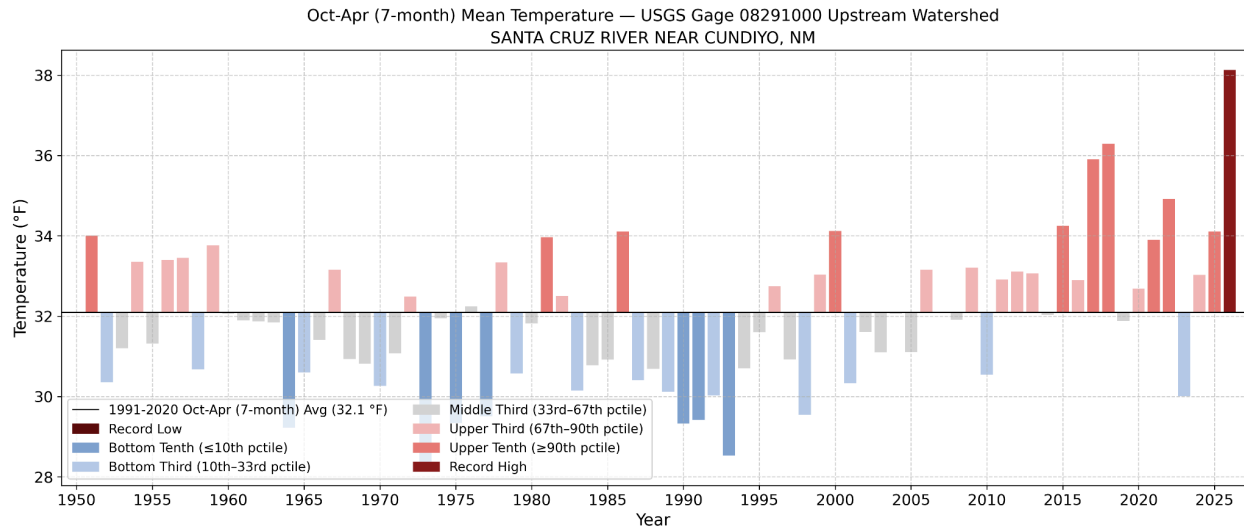


Average temperatures in April (left) were either above normal or much above normal, depending on location within the Santa Cruz region.

The recent three-month average (right; February–April) temperatures were **the warmest on record** for the Santa Cruz region and much of New Mexico.

Historical context: temperature

The chart below shows water-year-so-far (October–April) season-average temperature for each year, 1950–2026. The values are plotted relative to the long-term (1991–2020) average. Colors highlight whether temperature was *near normal*, *below normal*, *above normal*, *much-below normal*, *much-above normal*, a **record low**, or a **record high**. Values represent a spatial average of temperature within the Santa Cruz catchment area above the streamgage.

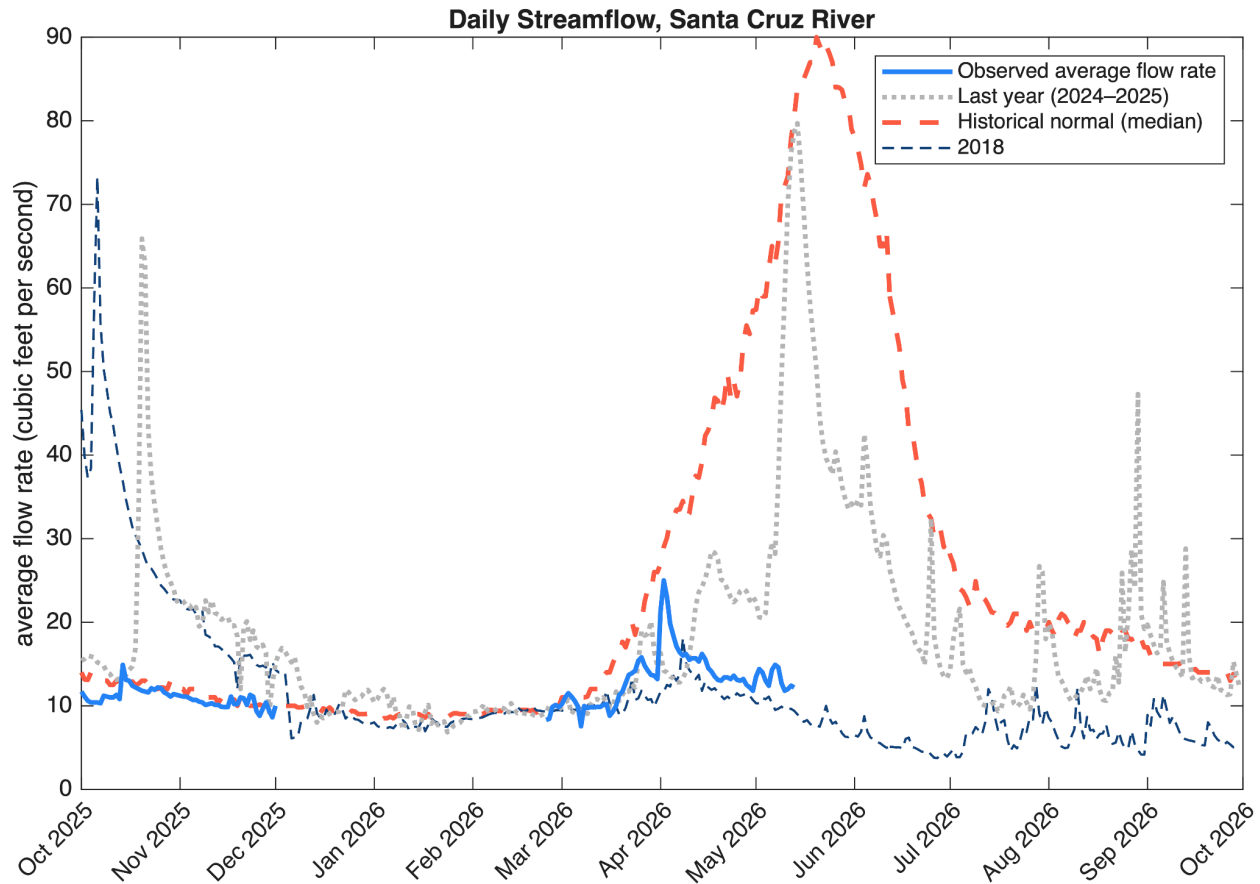


October–April temperatures averaged higher than in any previous year on record—more than 6°F warmer than the long-term average. The record was previously broken in 2018, when the seasonal temperatures were 4°F higher than the long-term average.

Streamflow

The USGS stream gauge on the Santa Cruz river at Cundiyo measures the water flowing into the Santa Cruz Lake reservoir, the combined flow of Rio Medio and Rio Frijoles. It does not account for downstream inputs like Rio Quemado. The figure plots the daily average instantaneous rate of flow in **Cubic feet per second (cfs)**.

Since October 2025 (Water Year 2026 so far)

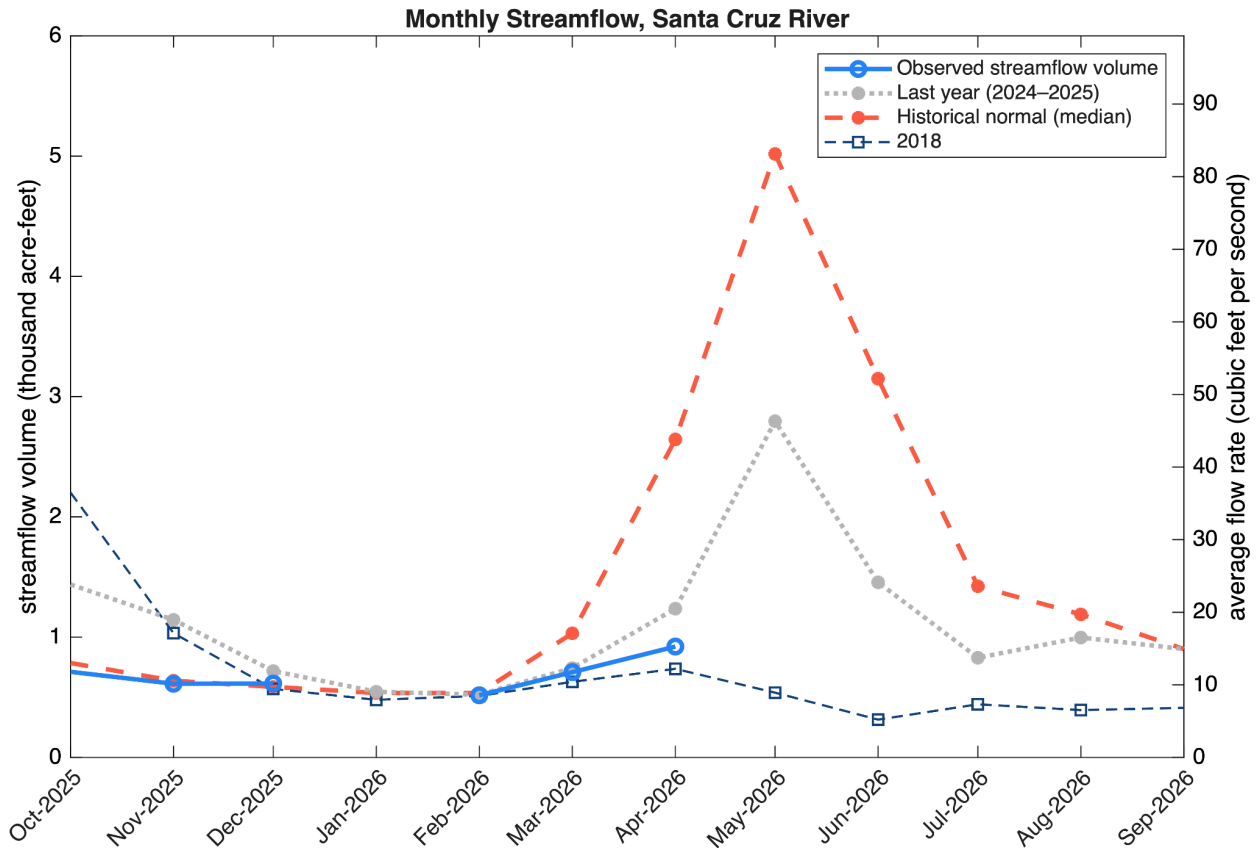


Santa Cruz streamflow was generally below normal in April and early May, with lower daily flow rates compared to last year. Flow rates in 2018 were lower than this year so far, but not by very much.

<https://waterdata.usgs.gov/monitoring-location/USGS-08291000/#dataTypeId=continuous-0006-0-0&period=P365D&showMedian=true&showFieldMeasurements=true>

Monthly Streamflow Volume

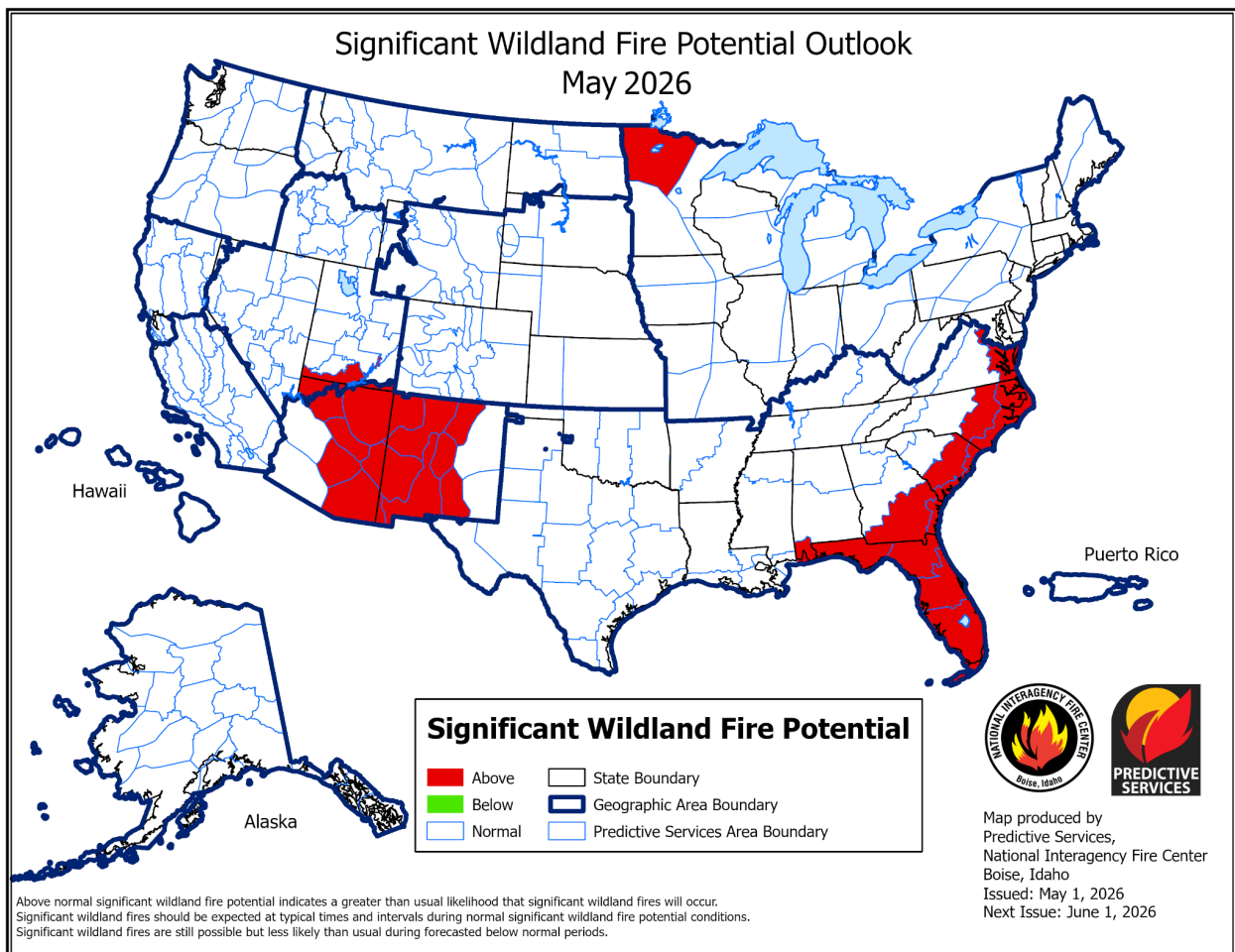
In the plot below **this year's streamflow volume for each month of the water year is represented by the blue line** and is compared to the **historical median streamflow volume (red line)**—the normal streamflow volume for each month. Streamflow volume is the total amount of water that has moved past a point over a given duration



April monthly-total streamflow was below normal volume and less than last year's volume.

Wildfire

The National Interagency Fire Center publishes the **Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook**, which identifies areas where the potential for significant wildland fire is **above-normal**, **near-normal**, or **below-normal**, for each month, looking four months ahead. The outlooks are intended to improve decision making and inform proactive management of wildland fire. Fire potential is assessed by incorporating information about vegetative fuels—abundance, dryness, spatial continuity—, the effect of past weather conditions on fuels, and the effect of expected weather conditions—on fuels and on any potential ignitions.

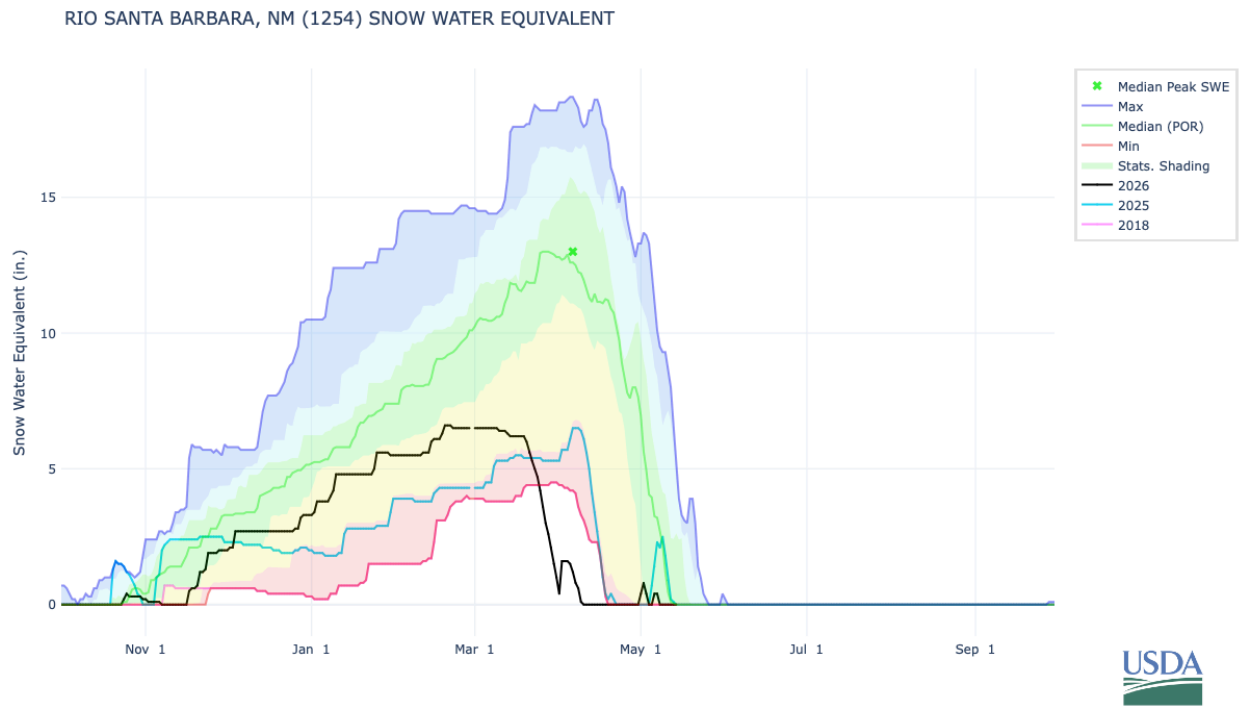


https://www.nifc.gov/nicc-files/predictive/outlooks/monthly_seasonal_outlook.pdf

Above-normal potential for significant wildland fire is expected for the Santa Cruz region in May. The monthly outlook for June also indicates above-normal potential for the Rio Chama region. For July, potential is expected to be near normal.

Snow (Snow Water Equivalent)

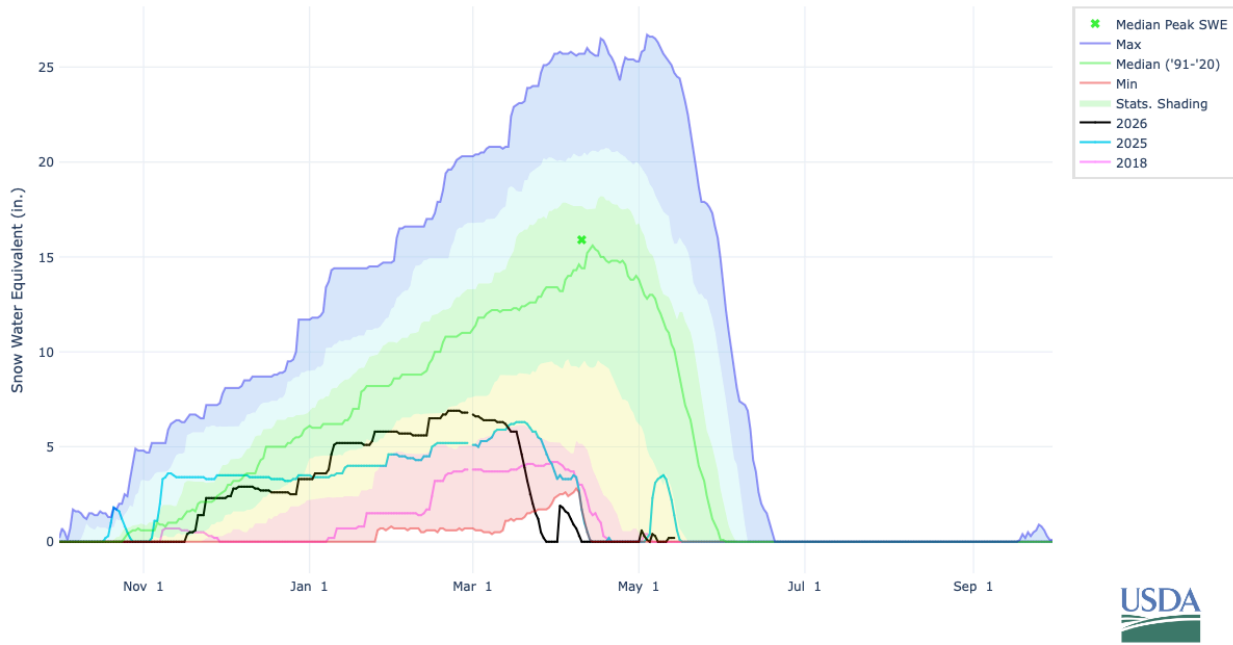
Rio Santa Barbara is the closest SNOTEL site to Santa Cruz. Winter snowpack is the leading factor determining streamflow and surface water availability; it provides useful context for how much water will be available long after it has melted. The plot below shows snow water equivalent (SWE) over the course of the water year (beginning in October), and how it compares to the range of values for daily SWE for all years in the record of observations—from the **record minimum (red line)** to the **record maximum (dark blue line)**. The **green line shows the median, or normal, accumulated precipitation**, and values falling within the green shading are considered near normal.



<https://nwcc-apps.sc.egov.usda.gov/awdb/site-plots/POR/WTEQ/NM/Rio%20Santa%20Barbara.html?state=NM>

Snowpack fell to record-low levels in late March when persistent record-warm temperatures brought on rapid melting (black line). Rio Santa Barbara SNOTEL station snow water equivalent (SWE) fell to zero in early April, when snowpack normally measures over 10 inches SWE.

SANTA FE, NM (922) SNOW WATER EQUIVALENT



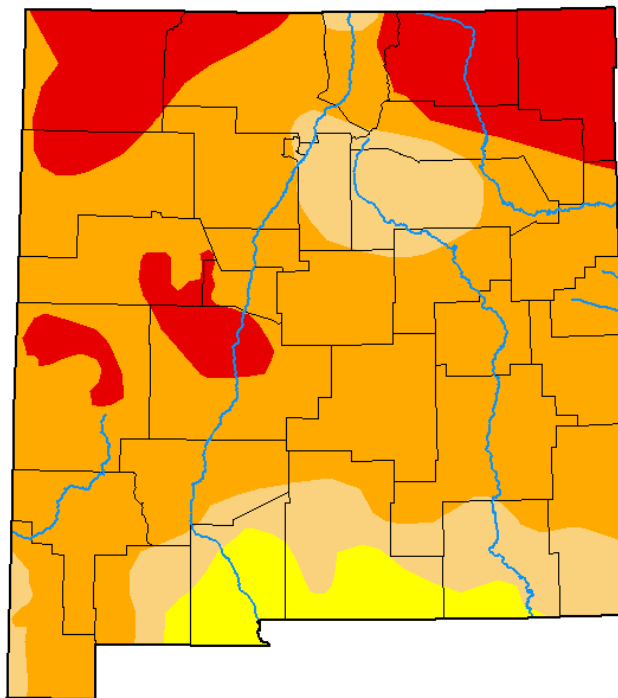
Snowpack at the Santa Fe SNOTEL station declined to zero in late March. Above-normal temperatures have affected snowpack all season; on February 25 when SWE peaked, it was 63 percent of normal, but total precipitation since October was 71 percent of normal.

Drought Status







The Drought Monitor classifies drought status by incorporating information from relevant data sources, including precipitation, temperature, soil moisture, surface water flows, groundwater levels, vegetation greenness, and local insights from field observations of experts.

U.S. Drought Monitor New Mexico

May 12, 2026
(Released Thursday, May. 14, 2026)
Valid 8 a.m. EDT



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>

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NCEI/NOAA



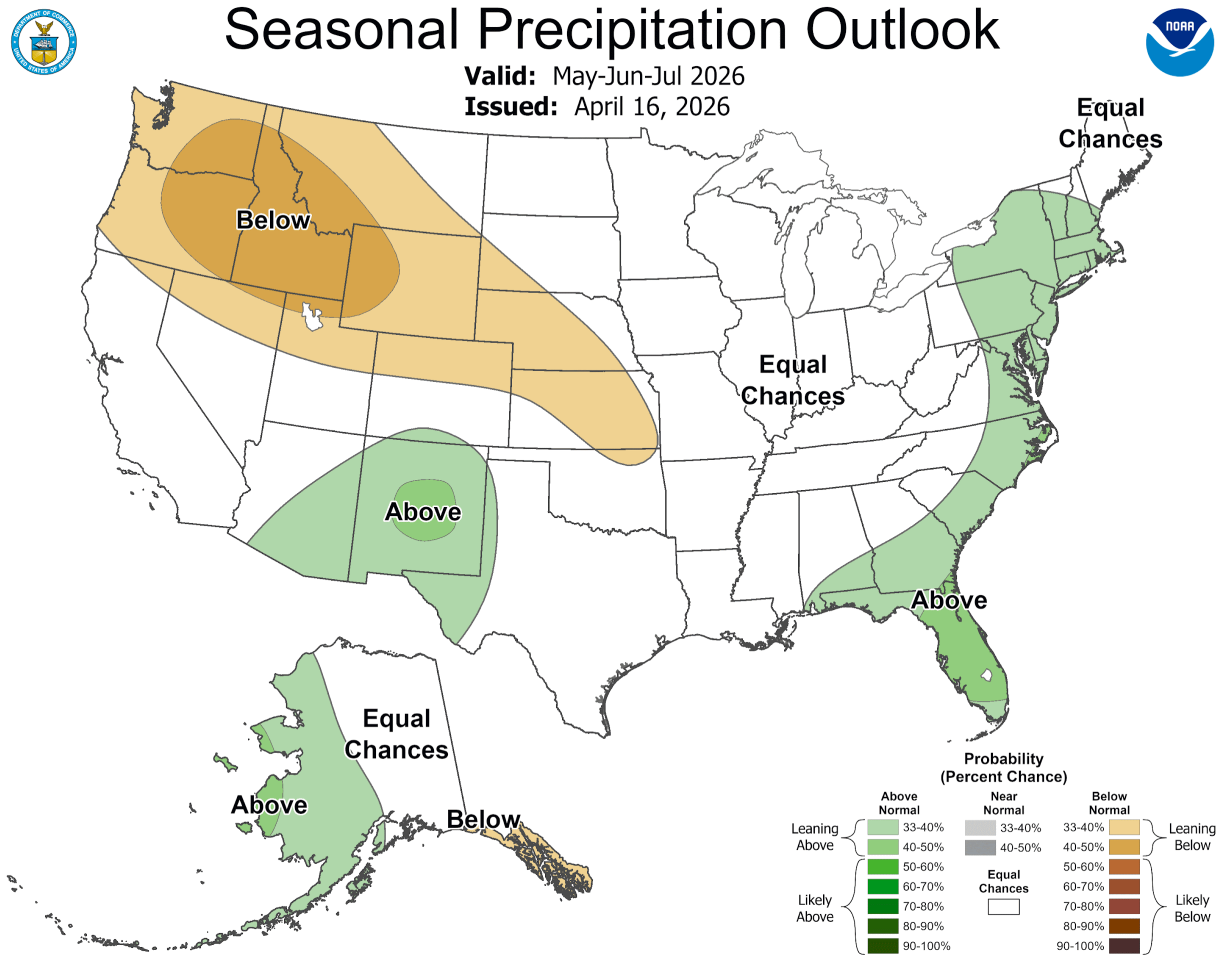
droughtmonitor.unl.edu

<https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/CurrentMap/StateDroughtMonitor.aspx?NM>

As of early mid May, the Santa Cruz region was considered to be in **moderate drought (D1)**. Moderate drought corresponds to drought conditions that historically occurred on average once every five to ten years.

Seasonal Outlook

NOAA Climate Prediction Center (CPC) produces seasonal forecasts for different time scales (one week to 3-month), and a range of lead-times (Day 8-14 to next year). The seasonal climate outlooks are not predictions for the upcoming months, but are estimates for the probability of the precipitation or temperature falling within the top, middle, or bottom third of the historical climate record for a given location.



https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/forecasts/month_to_season_outlooks.php

The seasonal precipitation forecast for May–July indicates chances lean toward **above-normal precipitation** for the Santa Cruz region (33–40% chance precipitation totals will rank in the upper one-third of records for the season).

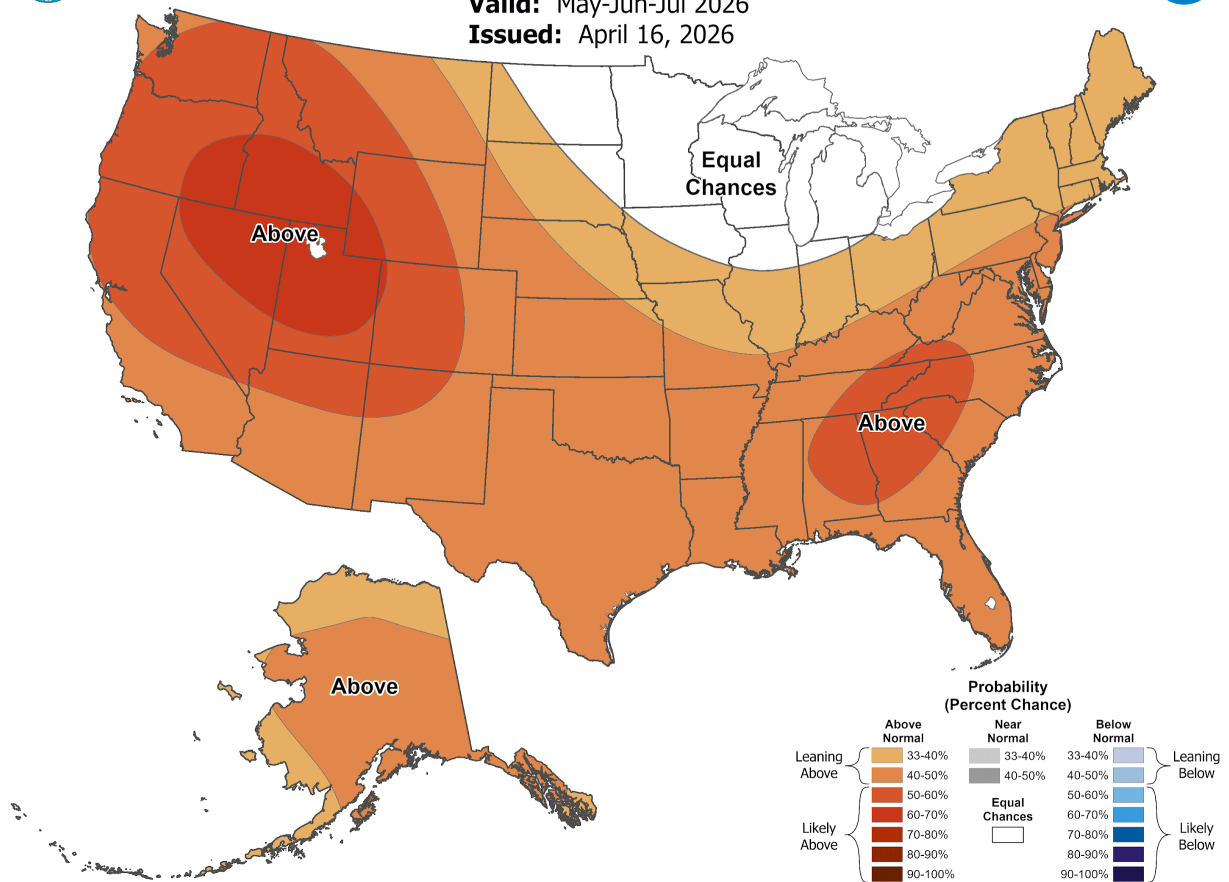


Seasonal Temperature Outlook



Valid: May-Jun-Jul 2026

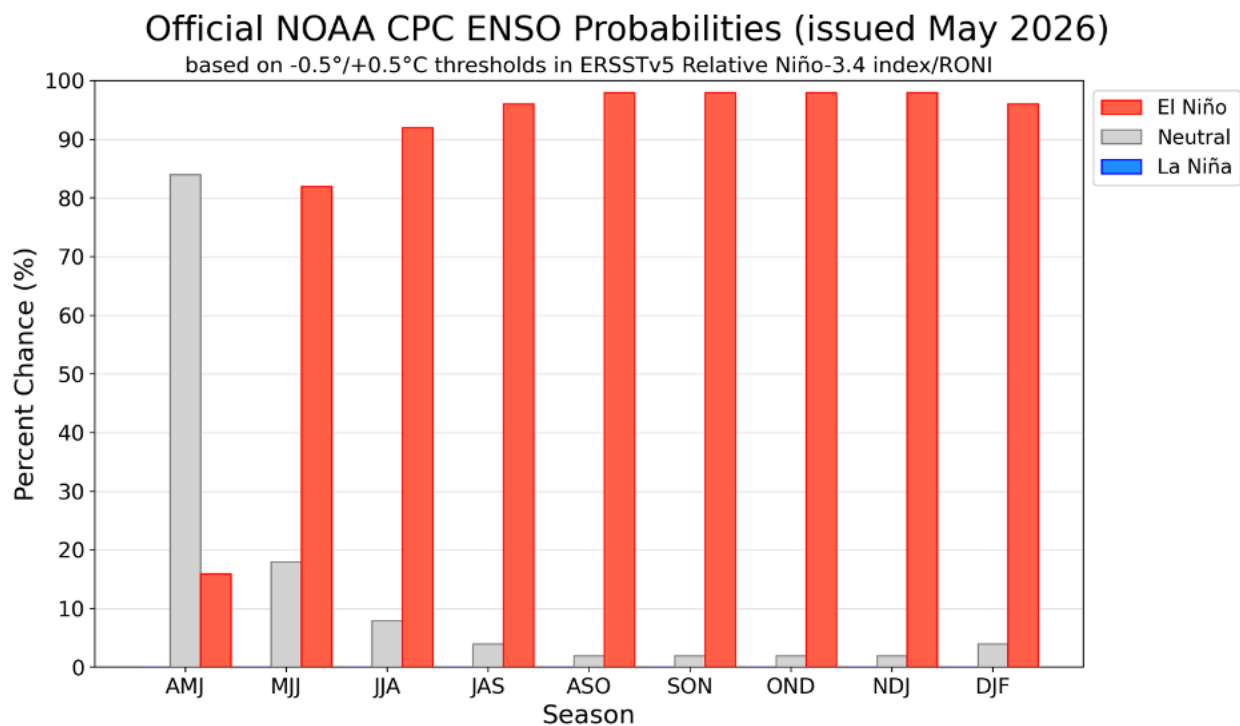
Issued: April 16, 2026



The May–July seasonal temperature forecast indicates a **likely (50–60%)** chance of **temperatures averaging above normal** for the three-month season.

ENSO (Forecast for Next Season)

The El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is relevant to the climate of the Southwest because it consistently affects cool-season (fall, winter, spring) climate; **El Niño** typically means wetter and cooler conditions during fall, winter, and spring; **La Niña** typically means dry and warmer conditions during that season. “**ENSO-neutral**” refers to conditions somewhere in-between La Niña or El Niño, and typically means we have less indication of which way seasonal climate will end up going. The months of the year are shown on the horizontal axis of the map in groups of three (i.e., DJF = December, January, February).



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

La Niña conditions persisted through the recent fall and winter months, but recent observations of sea-surface temperatures in the Pacific indicate **a transition to ENSO-neutral conditions has taken place.**

Forecast models indicate high probabilities of **ENSO-neutral** conditions persisting through the April–June (AMJ) seasonal forecast window.

El Niño conditions are expected to emerge sometime this summer and persist into the next cool season. By the May–July forecast window (MJJ), the forecast models give greater chances of El Niño versus a continuation of spring ENSO-neutral conditions. The probability of La Niña returning in 2026 is very low, according to forecasts.

Thank you for reading the Santa Cruz Climate Bulletin - please send any general feedback for questions to Steph (smladinich@ou.edu).

Background on the Santa Cruz Climate Bulletin

Two key decisions targeted here are:

- 1) Information and context supporting the decisions of the SCID board and to increase preparedness for weather events and changing patterns (an additional tool in the SCID tool box).
- 2) help inform parciantes for their short and long-term planting and irrigation strategies and the regional acequia association on watershed health planning and potential policy development. We also aspire to create a system where we can inform mayordomos/as for flood response actions, e.g. when to close head gates or be aware of potential flooding occurrences.

Our plan is to share this report seasonally. *We request your ongoing feedback* on the relevant questions, decision factors, clarity of explanations we are offering, and any other feedback that could help improve this report.

Both the relevance and limitations of this report were highlighted on August 29, 2025 when a massive cloud burst dumped approximately 1.25 inches of hail and rain over the course of an hour in our watershed, creating damaging and dangerous flooding in our communities. This weather was not in the forecast. This report captures trends, patterns and predicted weather. We hope that creating more conversations and awareness around changing and unpredictable patterns will enable all of us in our basin to be better equipped to adapt and respond to changing conditions. We will create additional avenues to continue sharing these strategies.

Contacts for questions:

For feedback / requested revisions to report:

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For NM specific climate questions:

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For support with adaptation strategies: Serafina Lombardi, NMAA

- Serafina@lasacequias.org or 505-995-9644

For questions about management decisions in the basin: Ron Gallegos, SCID

- scid2195@gmail.com or (505) 753-2195

For questions about watershed planning: Don Bustos, Greenroots Institute, Santa Cruz Land Grant and the Rio Quemado, Rio en Medio, Rio Frijoles, Rio Santa Cruz Stream Systems Acequia Association

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