

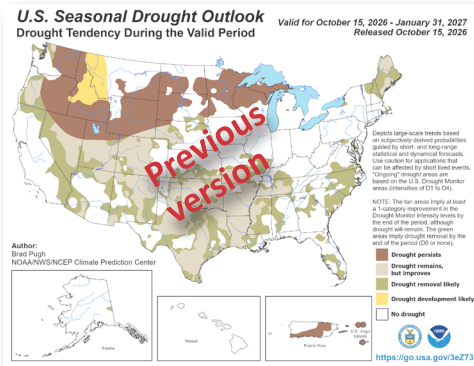
Updated U.S. Monthly & Seasonal Drought Outlooks

A clearer outlook at drought - what's new and how to interpret

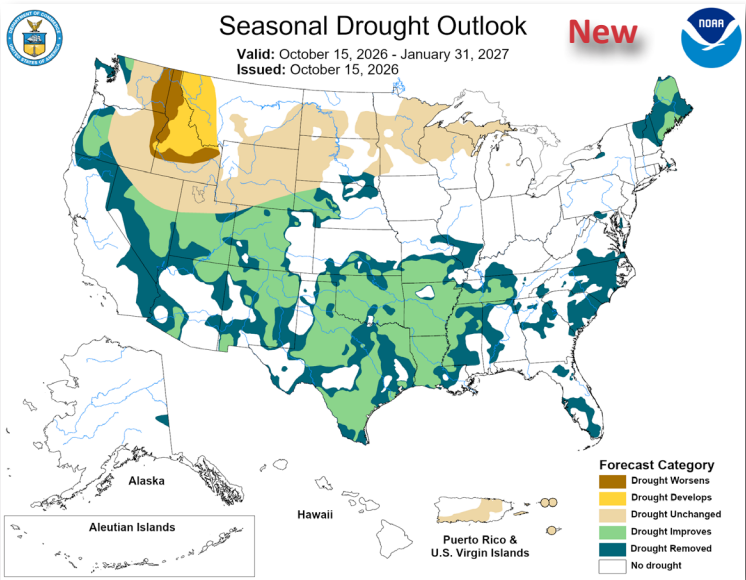
What's Changing and Why It Matters

NOAA's National Weather Service (NWS) introduced updated U.S. Monthly and Seasonal Drought Outlooks in October 2026 to make drought forecasts easier to read, interpret, and communicate. The updated maps feature a simplified color scheme, clearer legend categories, and less text, helping users quickly identify where drought is expected to develop, improve, be removed, remain, or worsen. NWS and NOAA's National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS) partnered with social scientists and drought stakeholders to redesign the outlooks using a collaborative, evidence-based process to develop and test improvements.

Then and Now: A side-by-side look



Previous maps contained more text and complex categories often leading to misinterpretation.



New maps showcase simplified colors, labels, and legends for clearer, more intuitive interpretation.

Designed with Users in Mind

Easier to interpret at a glance: Less text and clearer colors help users quickly identify the expected drought tendency.

Clearer distinction between outcomes: The new 'Drought Worsens' category distinguishes intensifying drought from drought that remains unchanged, providing new information to users.

Supports communication and decision-making: The redesigned display is intended to improve understanding and usability for agriculture, water resources, fire weather, emergency management, and other sectors.

Aligns with future probabilistic outlooks: The revisions support NWS's longer-term transition to probabilistic drought outlooks, which will provide greater context on possible drought outcomes to inform decision-making.

Tested for understanding: In a [study](#) of more than 800 participants, users were significantly more likely to understand that the outlooks show expected changes in drought conditions, not drought intensity.

Changes at a Glance

Feature	What's Changing
Color Scheme:	Updated colors to improve interpretation.
Legend:	Shorter, more direct category wording.
Map Text:	Reduced text for a less cluttered display.
Drought Tendency:	Addition of 'drought worsens' category to distinguish from drought remains unchanged.

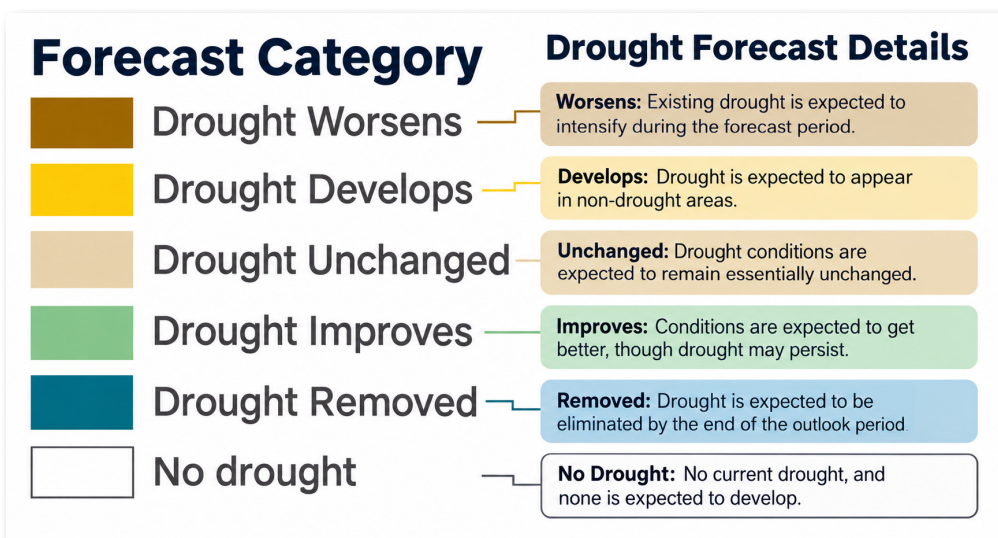
[Click here to access the New U.S. Drought Outlooks](#)



NOAA National Weather Service
& NOAA's National Integrated Drought Information System

How to Interpret the Updated U.S. Drought Outlooks?

The U.S. Drought Outlook shows how drought conditions are expected to change during the forecast period, not simply where drought is most severe. The categories and colors represent the expected drought tendency, where conditions may shift or stay the same over the coming month or season. To better understand the drought forecast categories, see the legend definitions in the diagram to the right and read the tips below on how to interpret the U.S. Monthly and Seasonal Drought Outlooks:



- **Start with the current drought conditions** on the [U.S. Drought Monitor](#) to understand where drought is present and how severe it is today. Then use the [U.S. Drought Outlook](#) maps to see the expected tendency by the end of the outlook period. The outlook represents large-scale trends, so localized or short-lived events may not be captured.
- **Look at the colors on the outlook map.** The category colors show the expected change in drought conditions during the forecast period, whether drought is expected to develop, improve, be removed, remain unchanged, or worsen.
- **Note the end of the forecast period.** The map represents the expected drought tendency by the end of the outlook period—either through the end of the upcoming month, or the end of the upcoming three-month period—rather than conditions on any particular day. It is not a day-to-day forecast and does not indicate that every location within a shaded area will experience the same changes in drought.
- **Remember that “improve” does not necessarily mean “remove.”** Drought can improve while remaining in place at the end of the forecast period. The ‘Drought Removed’ category indicates that drought is expected to end in the area depicted by the end of the forecast period.

The takeaway: Use the U.S. Monthly and Seasonal Drought Outlooks to understand where drought conditions are expected to change and in what direction, not simply where drought is expected to be most severe.

Frequently Asked Questions

- **When and where are the U.S. Monthly and Seasonal Drought Outlooks published?** The Monthly Drought Outlook (MDO) is released on the last day of each month at approximately 3:00 PM ET. The Seasonal Drought Outlook (SDO) is released on the third Thursday of each month at approximately 8:30 AM ET. NWS now makes a consistency adjustment to the SDO after the MDO is released at the end of the month, when needed. This helps address potential inconsistencies between the overlapping MDO and SDO periods. [Access the U.S. Drought Outlooks here.](#)
- **Are the redesigned outlooks new forecast products?** No. The redesign updates how drought forecast information is displayed and communicated. The U.S. Monthly and Seasonal Drought Outlooks will continue to provide guidance on expected drought changes over their respective forecast periods.
- **Will the redesign change how drought outlooks are used for planning and decision-making?** The outlooks will continue to support planning and preparedness for drought-related impacts. The clearer maps are intended to help users more readily interpret expected drought changes and communicate that information, especially in sectors such as agriculture, water resources, fire management, and emergency management.
- **Will the redesign support future drought forecast improvements?** Yes. The redesign is part of NWS’s longer-term effort to improve drought forecast communication and supports future development of probabilistic drought outlooks, which will provide users with more information on the likelihood of drought outcomes to inform decisions.

