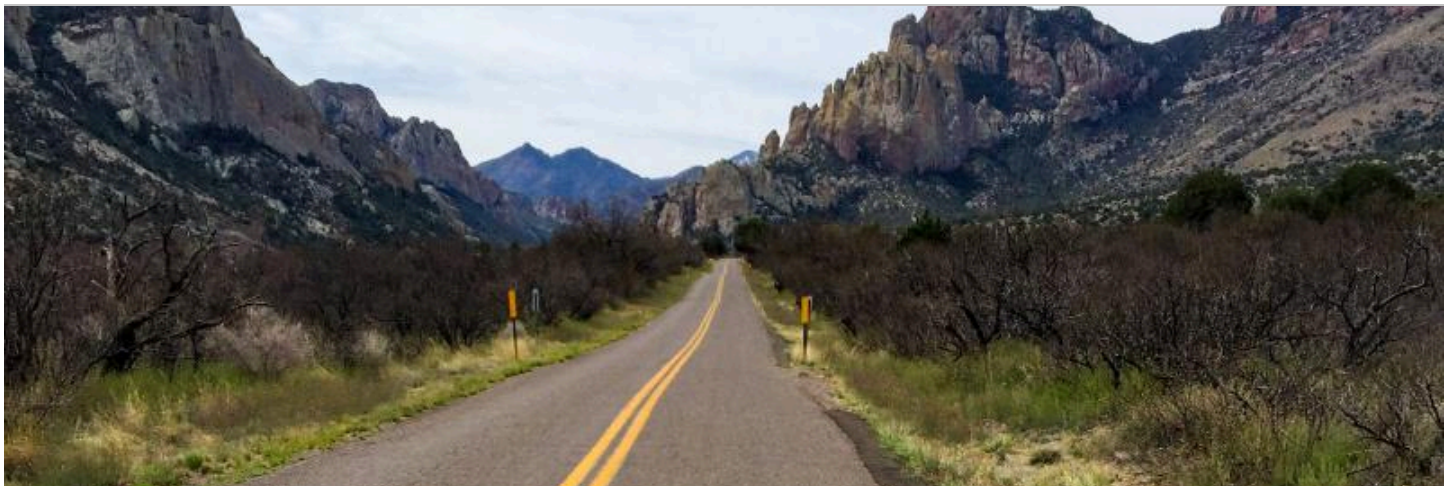

February 2026: Southwest Climate Outlook

Stacie Reece
March 3, 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.

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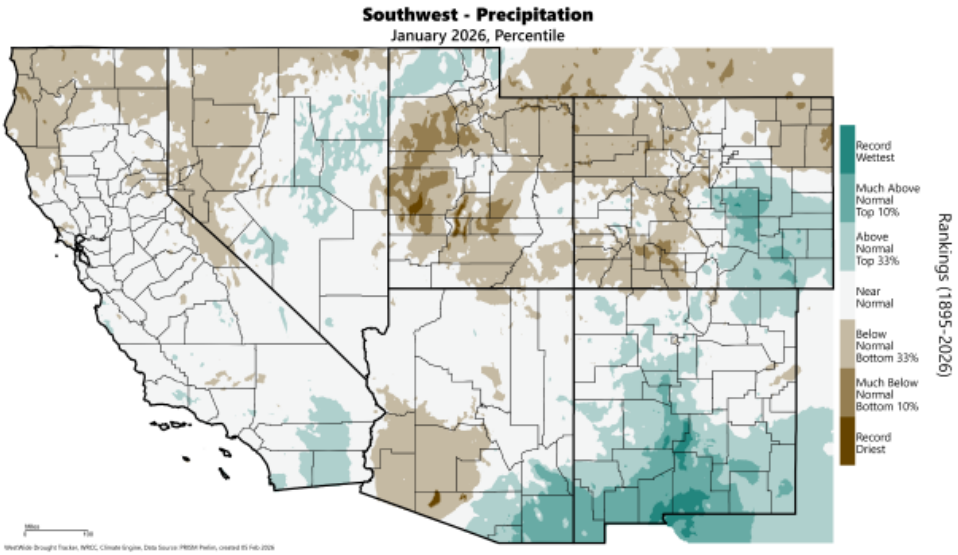
Precipitation and Temperature

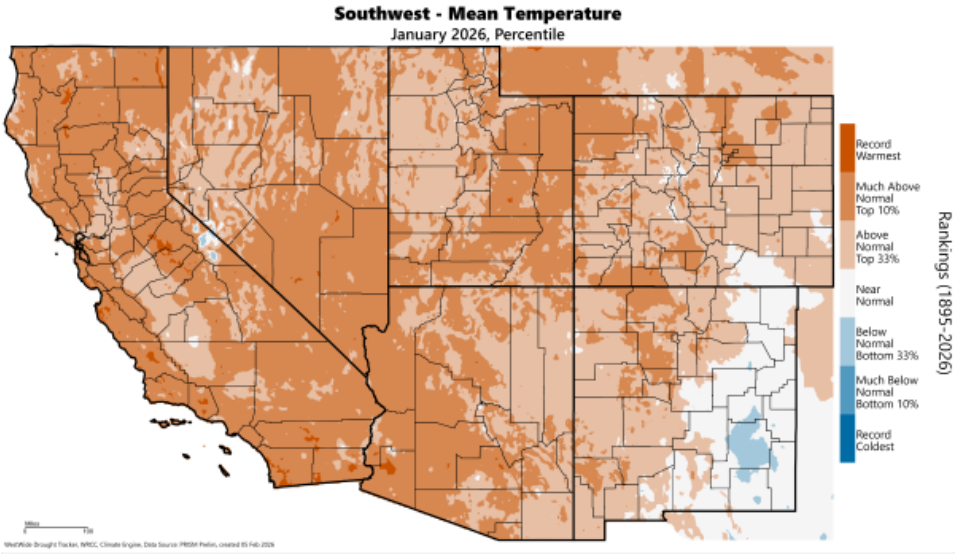
January precipitation was above normal or much-above normal for southern New Mexico and parts of southeastern

Arizona, ranging to near normal precipitation for northern parts of the region, and below normal precipitation for southwestern Arizona.



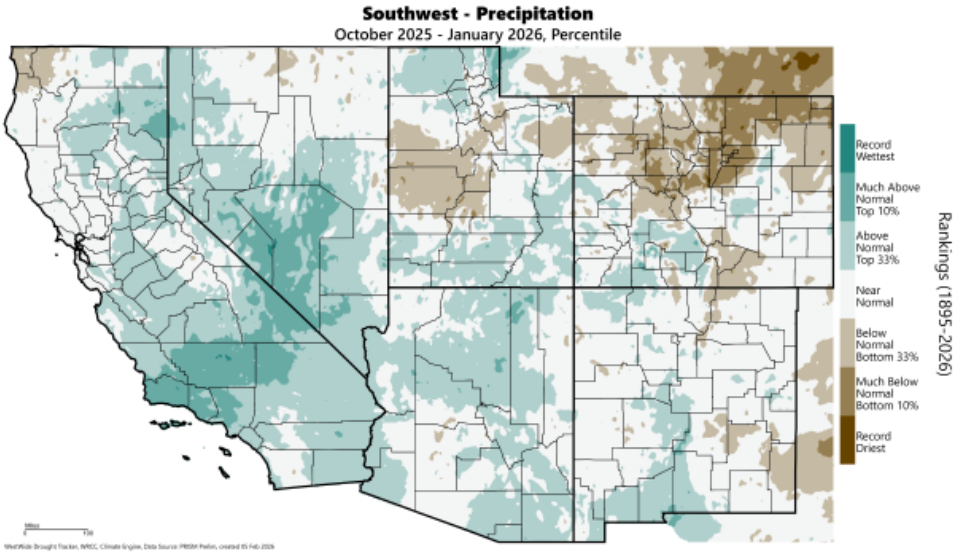
Source: WestWide Drought Tracker

January temperatures were generally above normal to much-above normal for Arizona and much of New Mexico, with near normal to below normal temperatures for eastern New Mexico.



Source: WestWide Drought Tracker

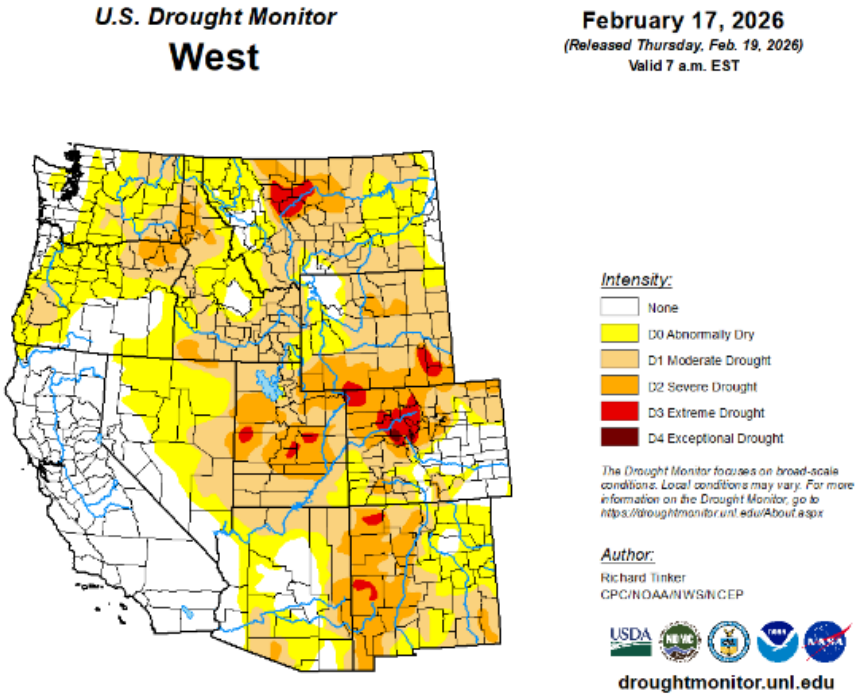
Precipitation totals for the water year so far (October 2025–January 2026) are generally above normal to near normal for most areas of Arizona and New Mexico, with some notable exceptions—totals in the Sangre de Cristo and southern San Juan Mountains of northern New Mexico are below normal, as are totals for parts of southeastern New Mexico.



Source: WestWide Drought Tracker

Drought

Drought conditions have shown some improvement over the last month—the proportion of New Mexico classified under severe drought (D2) or worse has fallen to 37%, compared to over 50% one month ago—but drought conditions are still classified as extreme (D3) in areas of Catron and San Juan Counties. The area of severe drought stretches from the NM bootheel to the Colorado border, spanning into eastern Arizona and into the Middle Rio Grande. Parts of central and western Arizona are not in drought, but the rest of the state is generally abnormally dry or in moderate drought.



Source: U.S. Drought Monitor

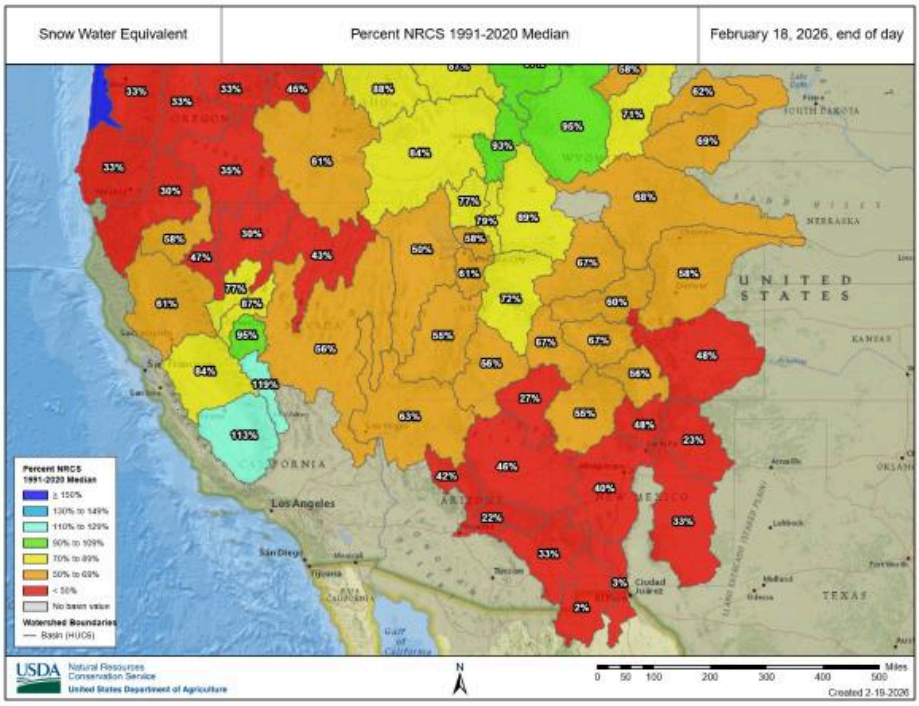
NIDIS Improved and Expanded State Pages on Drought.Gov

New Mexico

Arizona

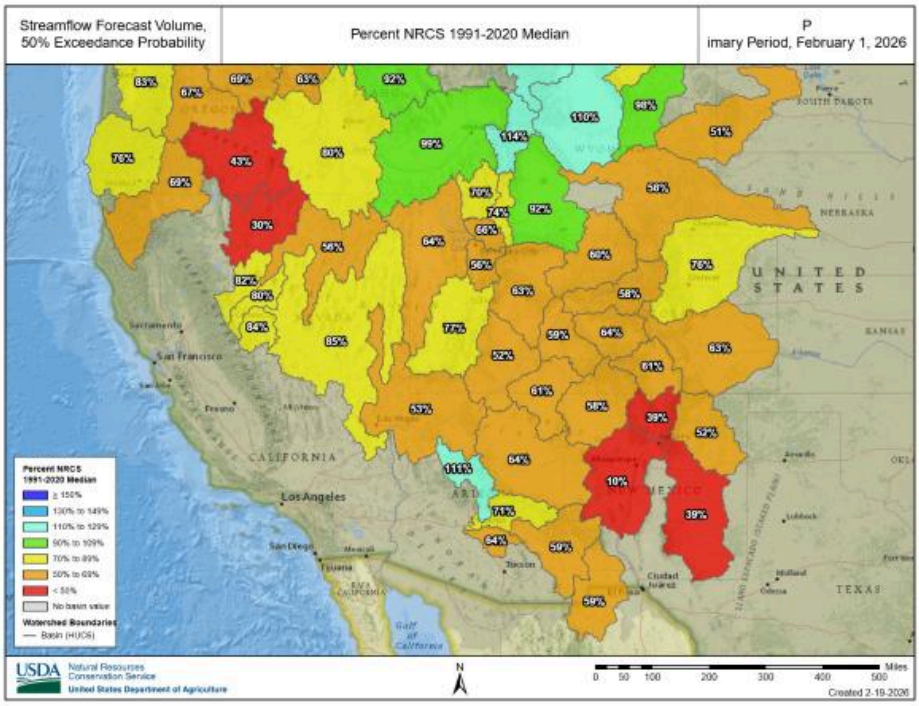
Snowpack & Streamflow

Mountain snowpack levels are below normal across the Southwest, and most basins within Arizona and New Mexico are storing less than 50 percent of normal snow water storage for this time of year. Snowpack in the Rio Grande headwaters is 56 percent of normal; Upper Colorado River Basin average snowpack is 70 percent of normal.



USDA: Natural Resources Conservation Service

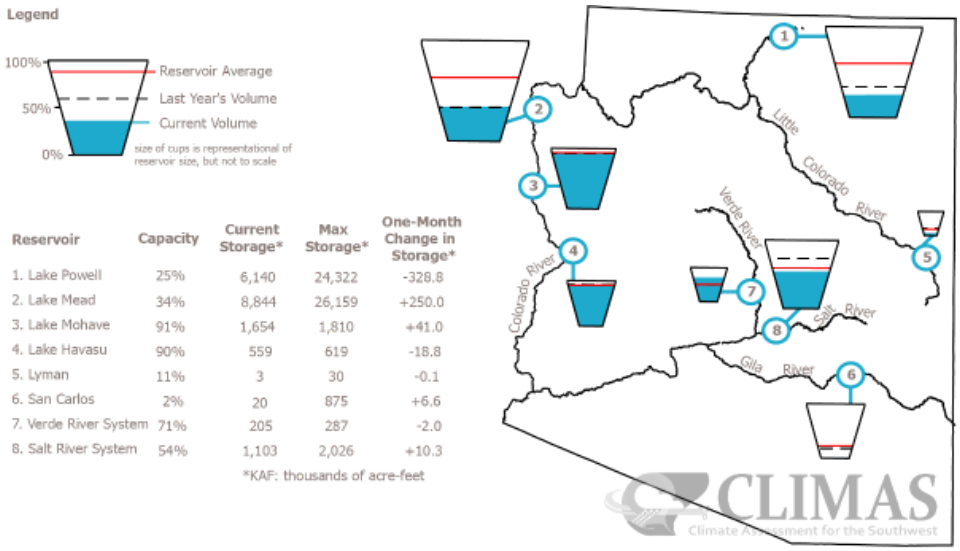
Streamflow forecasts, based on snowpack as of February 1, are predicting below normal volumes of streamflow during the spring snowmelt runoff season—as low as 10 percent of normal for the Middle Rio Grande Basin. The basin-average streamflow forecast for the Upper Colorado River Basin is for 62 percent of normal volume.



USDA: Natural Resources Conservation Service

Water Supply

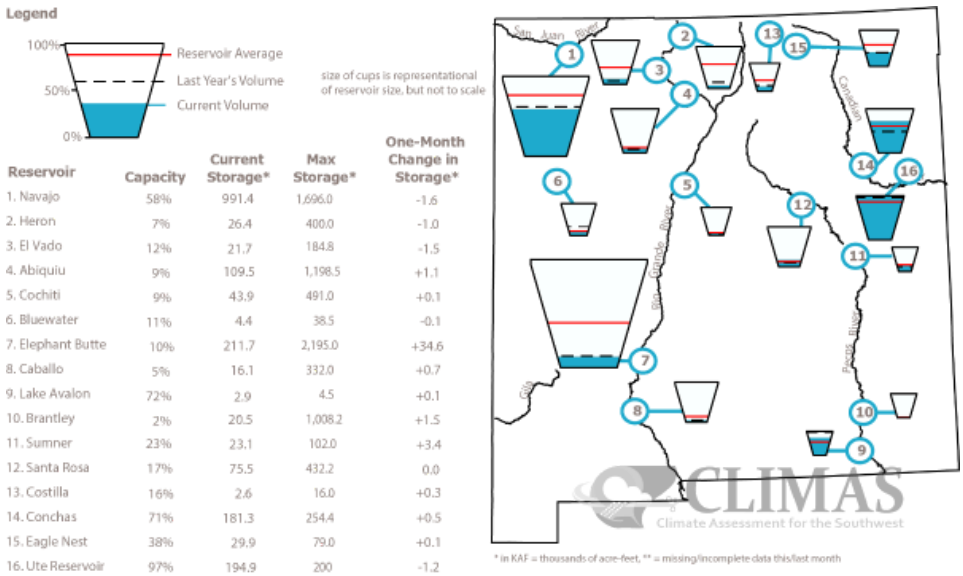
Lake Mead and Lake Powell's combined storage is down over last year and makes up less than one-half of long-term average volume, or less than one-third of total combined capacity. Salt River system reservoirs are down compared to last year and the long-term average; San Carlos is very low following a year of severe drought on the upper Gila River watershed. New Mexico reservoir storage is generally split between healthy levels in the eastern parts of the state, and low levels elsewhere in the state, where storage is down over last year and compared to long-term averages.



Reservoir	Capacity	Current Storage*	Max Storage*	One-Month Change in Storage*
1. Lake Powell	25%	6,140	24,322	-328.8
2. Lake Mead	34%	8,844	26,159	+250.0
3. Lake Mohave	91%	1,654	1,810	+41.0
4. Lake Havasu	90%	559	619	-18.8
5. Lyman	11%	3	30	-0.1
6. San Carlos	2%	20	875	+6.6
7. Verde River System	71%	205	287	-2.0
8. Salt River System	54%	1,103	2,026	+10.3

*KAF: thousands of acre-feet

Figure 1. Arizona reservoir volumes for the end of January 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.



Reservoir	Capacity	Current Storage*	Max Storage*	One-Month Change in Storage*
1. Navajo	58%	991.4	1,696.0	-1.6
2. Heron	7%	26.4	400.0	-1.0
3. El Vado	12%	21.7	184.8	-1.5
4. Abiquiu	9%	109.5	1,198.5	+1.1
5. Cochiti	9%	43.9	491.0	+0.1
6. Bluewater	11%	4.4	38.5	-0.1
7. Elephant Butte	10%	211.7	2,195.0	+34.6
8. Caballo	5%	16.1	332.0	+0.7
9. Lake Avalon	72%	2.9	4.5	+0.1
10. Brantley	2%	20.5	1,008.2	+1.5
11. Sumner	23%	23.1	102.0	+3.4
12. Santa Rosa	17%	75.5	432.2	0.0
13. Costilla	16%	2.6	16.0	+0.3
14. Conchas	71%	181.3	254.4	+0.5
15. Eagle Nest	38%	29.9	79.0	+0.1
16. Ute Reservoir	97%	194.9	200	-1.2

Figure 2. New Mexico reservoir volumes for end of January 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)

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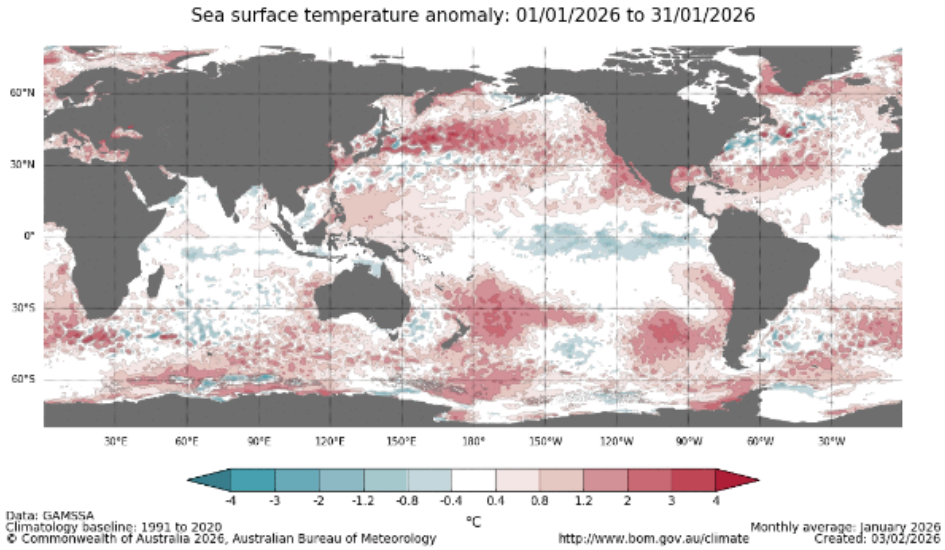
BOR: New Mexico Dashboard

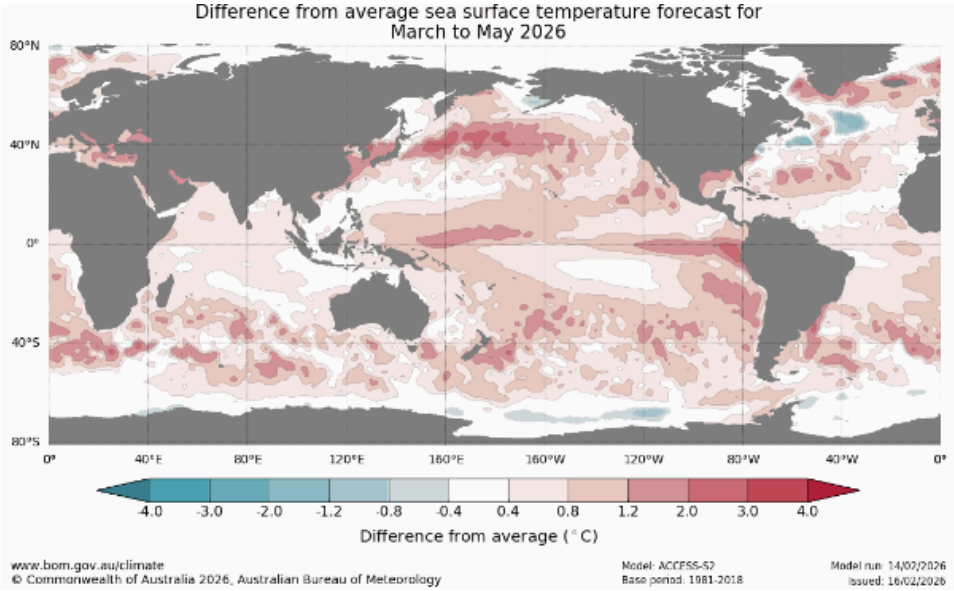
ENSO Tracker

January sea surface temperatures (SSTs) were generally cooler than average in the central-to-eastern equatorial Pacific, a pattern reflecting the La Niña conditions that reached peak intensity this winter, but which are expected to fade, with the area of cooler than normal SSTs warming to near normal or even above normal temperatures (reflecting ENSO-neutral or El Niño conditions, respectively).



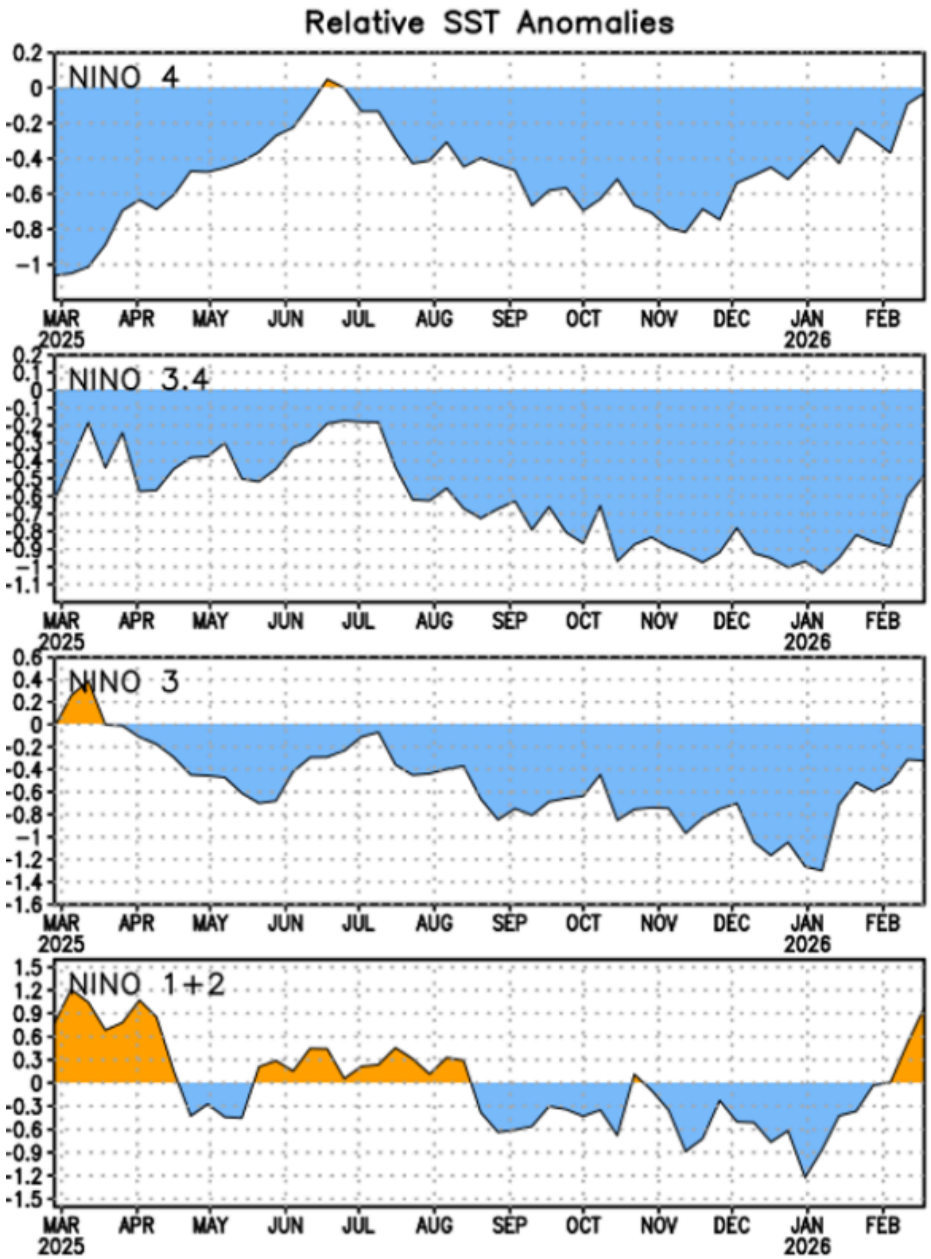
Source: Australian Bureau of Meteorology

The March–May SST forecast from the Australian ACCESS model shows warmer than average SSTs in the eastern equatorial Pacific—what would be a rapid transition to El Niño conditions. This model's forecast is more aggressive than the other forecast models, the majority of which predict ENSO-neutral conditions, or near average SSTs in the central-to-eastern equatorial Pacific, during this forecast window.



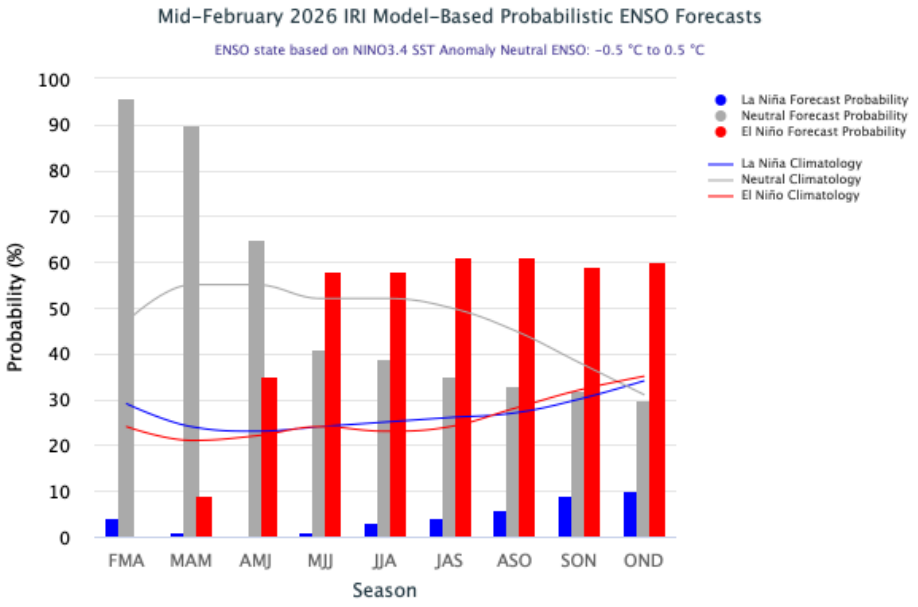
Source: Australian Bureau of Meteorology

As of mid-February, SSTs within the Nino 3.4 monitoring region, which NOAA uses to diagnose ENSO status, were just on the edge of La Niña—0.5 °C below average. NOAA has recently changed their official SST metric from *SST Anomalies*—the SST's difference from a long-term average—to *Relative SST Anomalies*, which incorporate how the regional SSTs contrast relative to global tropical SSTs. The change is intended to isolate the signal of ENSO variability from the background trend of increasing SSTs.



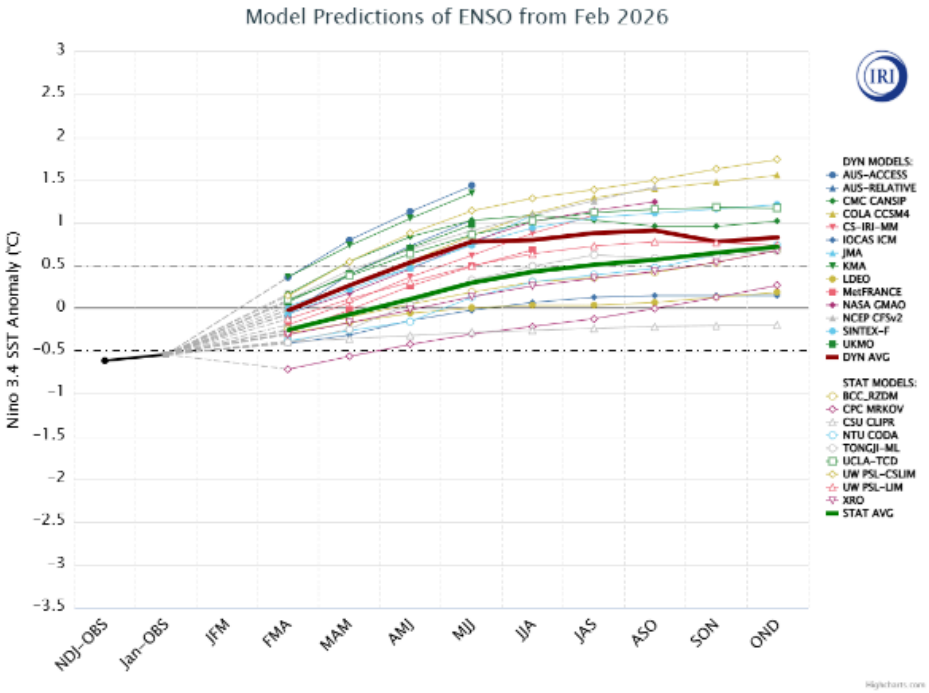
Source: Climate Prediction Center (NOAA)

ENSO forecast models overwhelmingly favor ENSO-neutral in the near-term, through the March–May forecast window, meaning La Niña conditions are expected to fade rapidly as the central and eastern equatorial Pacific warms relative to long-term average SSTs, and relative to tropical SSTs globally. By the May–July forecast window, El Niño conditions are the favorite among the models.



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

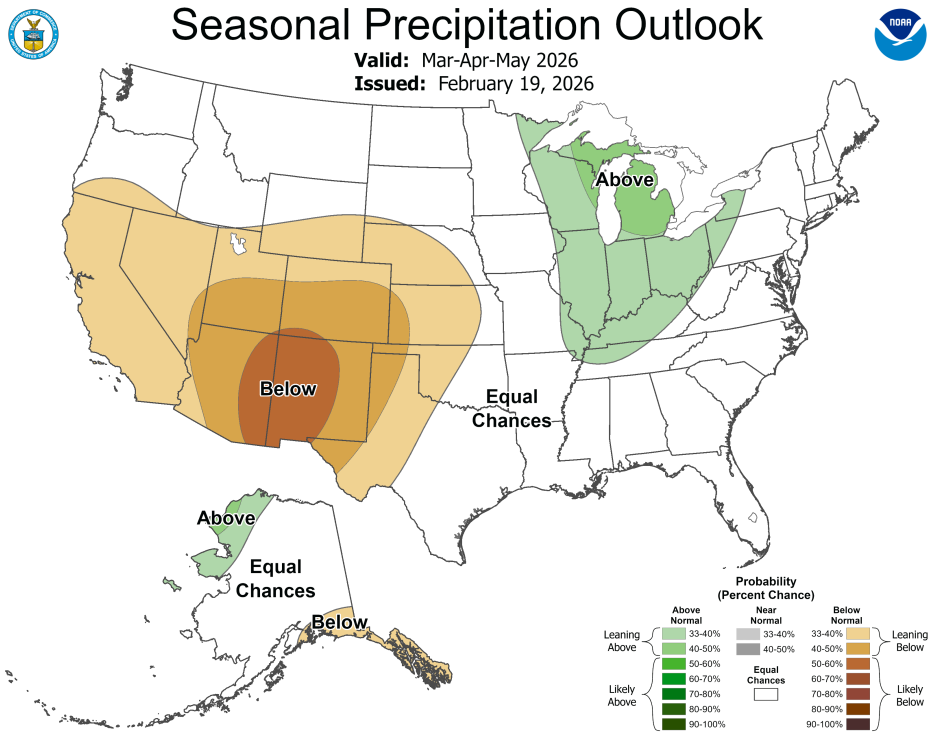
ENSO forecasts of individual forecast models are all showing a similar trajectory of increasing SSTs (relative to the long-term average, in the central-eastern Pacific) over the coming months, starting from the nearest forecast window (February–April, or FMA). The dynamical models, which simulate fluid dynamics and other physical processes, tend to show faster warming than the statistical models, which base their predictions on what happened during comparable years in the past.



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

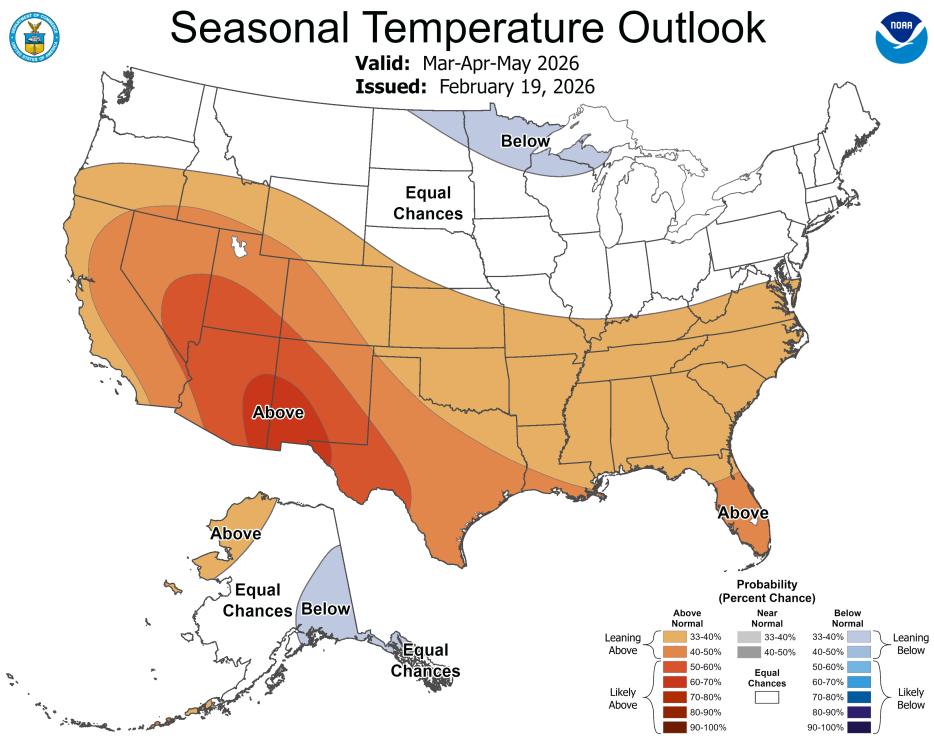
Seasonal Forecasts

The March–May seasonal precipitation forecast indicates a *likely* (50-60%) chance of below normal precipitation for an area that spans central and western New Mexico and eastern Arizona. The forecast *leans* toward (gives 33-50% chance of) below normal precipitation for an area that includes the remaining parts of Arizona and New Mexico.



Source: Climate Prediction Center (NOAA)

The March–May seasonal temperature forecast calls above normal temperatures *likely* for much of Arizona and New Mexico, with a 50-70% chance probability. The forecast shows the highest probabilities for an area including parts of southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico.



Source: Climate Prediction Center (NOAA)

Public Health Corner

This quarter we focus on the impacts of wildfire on health in Arizona and New Mexico. Well established are the effects of smoke from wildfires exacerbating chronic respiratory conditions. However, smoke from wildfires occurring at the wildland-urban interface, which often burn structures, have been shown to emit toxic organic compounds. CLIMAS researchers also identified distinct, ecosystem-specific responses to climate variability and wildfire dynamics in southwestern conifer forests, shrublands, and grasslands. There is still a lot to learn about the health effects of what burns during a fire.

When it comes to cardiovascular health, knowing what burns during a wildfire may be critical to understanding the risk because exposure to particulate matter and toxic smoke can activate inflammatory and coagulation processes in the body.

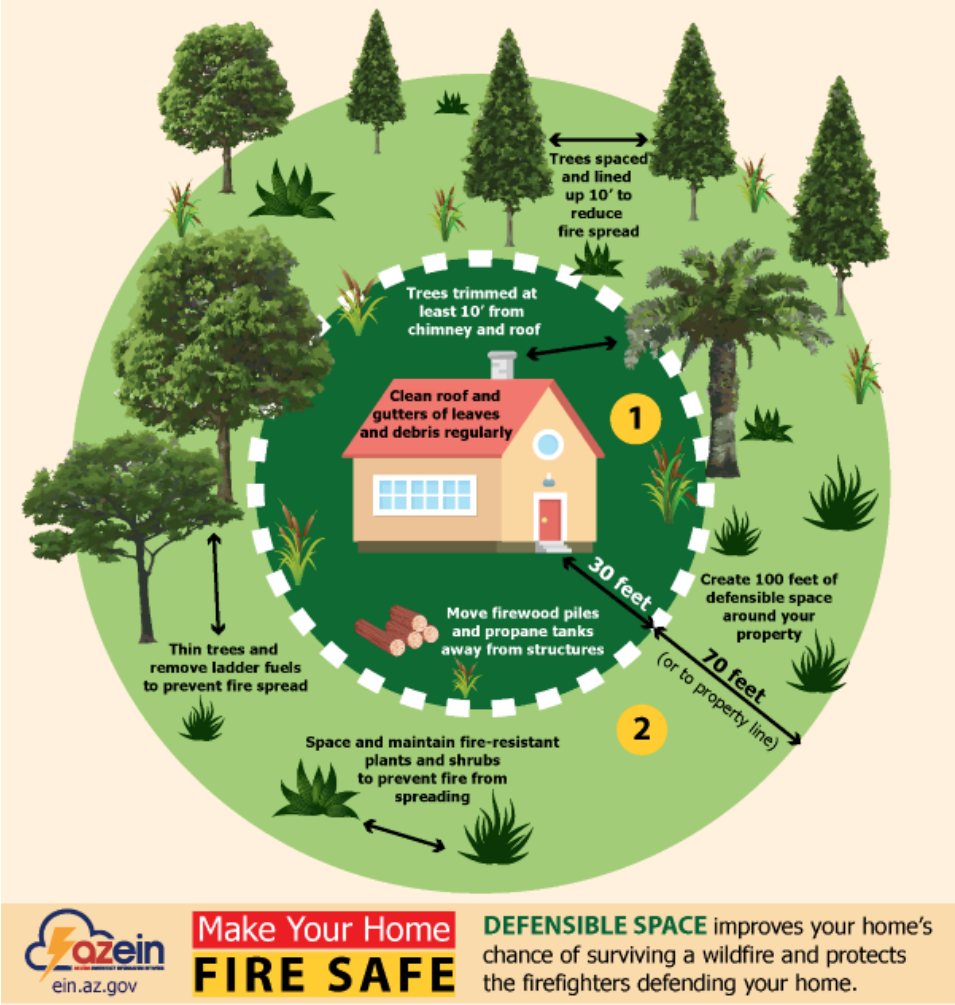
Since we last updated you on CLIMAS wildfire projects in January 2025, CLIMAS researchers (Erika, Heidi & Dan) published their study exploring the differences in cardiovascular health outcomes by what burns in a wildfire. In that study, we showed an overall elevated risk for general cardiovascular disease and, in specific subtypes: dysrhythmia and hypertensive diseases, following wildfire. When we compared fires that burned natural sources to fires that burned peat or structures (which have a greater likelihood of toxic smoke) the general "all cardiovascular" conditions and dysrhythmia had a greater risk of emergency department visits.

Coming out soon is a new study where we sought to aid health departments as they respond to increased regional wildfire activity and the risk of multiple or cascading events occurring. CLIMAS researchers (Heidi, Erika, Dan & Ladd) interviewed public health researchers to understand what role has public health had in wildfire response. Conversations with practitioners in Arizona and New Mexico revealed best practices including: clear and consistent messaging, building trust with community partners and connecting people to resources rather than providers of 'stuff', and supporting cross-sectoral collaboration and flexibility as a means to support capacity.

Building on that work, CLIMAS researcher Heidi, and Florent Mouillot, senior scientist at CNRS and IRD, are teaming up to improve how wildfire smoke is measured and how it interacts with extreme heat to affect cardiovascular health. Using data from the U.S., France, and North Africa, the team is evaluating health risks and assessing the effectiveness of prescribed winter burns.

Wondering what you can do to be sure you're prepared if a wildfire happened in your area?

The International Association of Fire Chiefs manage the Ready, Set Go program to help residents prepare for wildfire – Check out the Arizona and New Mexico specific websites for Ready, Set Go! If you're worried about air quality, the US Air Quality Index website has local conditions, and most weather applications on phones integrate air quality into daily weather reports.



Source: Arizona Emergency Information Network - Ready, Set, Go!

> *Join us next quarter in the Public Health Corner as we dive into another climate associated health impact in Arizona and New Mexico, and discover ways we can all work together to create a healthier and more resilient future.*

Arizona Environmental Public Health Tracking Explorer

New Mexico Environmental Public Health Tracking - for age adjusted rates per 100K asthma ED visits (most recent is 2022)

Southwest Climate Podcast

January 2026 SW Climate Podcast - Weather's Been Weird

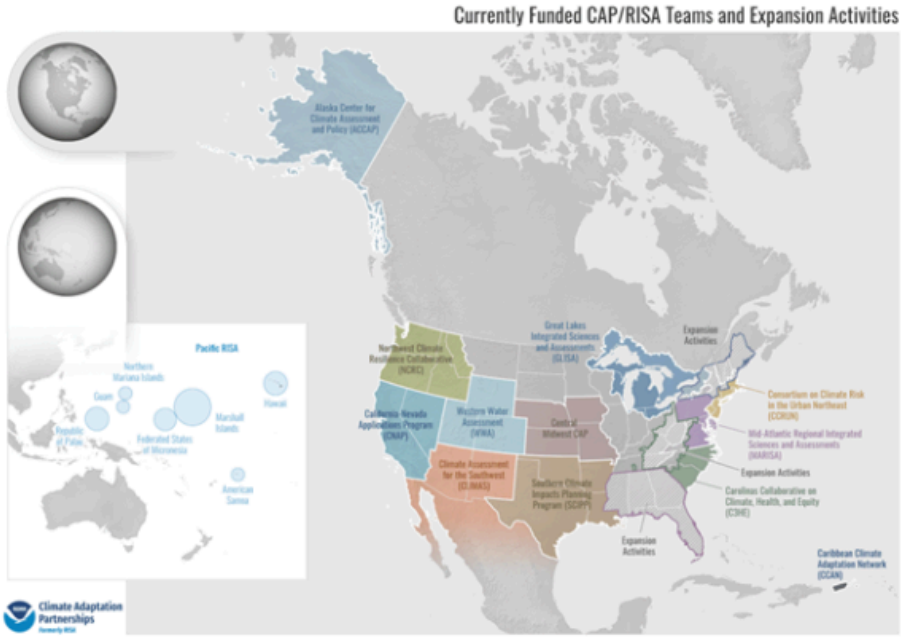
Recorded 01/30/2026, Aired 02/02/2026

Hosts Zack Guido and Mike Crimmins are kicking off 2026 with a look at this winter's weird weather in this month's Southwest Climate Podcast. They do a recap of the last couple of months of precip and temps. They do a review of large scale climate patterns - Madden–Julian Oscillation, Greenland Block - and get into a deep discussion about the Polar Vortex. They cover the not-so-great coverage of snowpack and look at the forecasts through peak season going forward. Rounding out the episode is the NOAA announcement on RONI (a topic of past episodes) and a preview of the AI focused episode that is in the works.

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 Climate Adaptation Partnerships (CAP) Program (formerly known as Regional Integrated Sciences and Assessments, or RISA). 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 CAP program here

Disclaimer

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