

Ask an Expert: How Low Snowpack Could Affect the Wildfire Season this Year

03/20/2026

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Limited snowpack, as seen from Parley's Summit looking west into Parley's Canyon. Normally, this area would be covered with several feet of snow this time of year. The snowfield on the left side of the photo is the Parleys Canyon Fire burn area from 2021.

Many people are wondering what impact this winter's lackluster snowpack will have on the upcoming wildland fire season. As we approach the end of March, snowpack is at record-low levels across the state. Utah has also experienced the warmest winter on record, and although precipitation overall is near average, most of it fell as rain. While higher elevations remain snow-covered, mid-level elevations have only a light dusting of snow; at this time of year, there should be feet.

Some have compared this winter to that of 1976-1977, when many ski resorts began investing in snowmaking. Although that year brought an extreme snow drought across the West, it is hard to make a good comparison because this winter has been unusually warm and rainy.

While it is still early to predict wildfire season, in a normal year, we would expect to see more snowstorms before the end of winter. But even if we get several storms, on the current trajectory, it likely won't fix the problem. There are several things to consider regarding wildfire season:

- On lower-elevation rangelands, there was limited snow to compact last year's growth. Significant rains fell in October and into the winter, bringing higher soil moisture. Much will depend on whether moisture persists through the growing season to support the growth of finer fuels like grasses. Of concern is the development of the cheatgrass crop, an invasive species that burns easily, especially once it dries out early in the summer.
- In areas where grasslands transition to brush, and pinyon-juniper woodlands extend up into the timber,

fire season could start earlier than usual, particularly in the higher elevations of southern Utah.

- In forested areas at higher elevations, the lack of snow could be the big driver. Heavier fuels, such as downed logs and forest vegetation, could dry earlier as snow melts sooner, potentially lengthening and intensifying the fire season. Thus, instead of the fire season becoming active in July, it could begin in June. [The Great Basin Coordination Center's Predictive Services Fire Potential Outlook](#) has identified "above normal" for significant wildland fire potential in parts of southern Utah as we head into June.

However, there are many variables, as we have seen in past years in Utah:

- We have had years with good snowpack, but as we approached summer, there were record-setting high temperatures in May and June, causing deep snowpack to melt early. Then, a lightning burst with thunderstorms crossed the state, causing wildfires to erupt.
- We have also had dry winters where it looked like there was potential for an active fire season, but then back-to-back rainstorms arrived across the state from May into early summer, and we ended up with a relatively mild fire season.
- Monsoons can have an impact on ignitions from lightning, but the rain can also dampen fire fuels. A more robust monsoon with prolonged elevated relative humidity and widespread rains will tend to slow, if not end, wildfires. Meanwhile, an underperforming monsoon will allow the fire season to extend later into the summer and even fall. While the monsoons can have a statewide impact, southern Utah tends to be affected more.

With warm temperatures and mild conditions across Utah, now is a good time to create a firewise landscape in your yard to increase protection before the wildfire season hits.

USU Extension, in collaboration with KUTV 2 News and reporter Brian Schnee, developed a video to answer the question, "[What can we do to protect our homes from a wildfire?](#)"

The video includes steps property owners can take to create a firewise landscape when living in Utah's wildland/urban interface, where homes are built into the forests and rangelands.

Because we have already seen human-caused wildfires in Utah this spring, which will likely continue until vegetation

greens up, everyone needs to be involved in prevention. When visiting, working, or living in the wildland, we all have a shared responsibility to prevent wildfires. Visit the [SmokeyBear.com](https://www.smokeybear.com) website for prevention tips and information.

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