

Summary of Fire Weather for the 2026 Alaska Fire Season

2026: A quiet season with many fires that were caught quickly

After a near normal winter snowpack across the state going into spring, a cool May slowed spring snowmelt, especially across the high elevations of the Interior. Parts of western and southwest Alaska were the only areas of the state with widespread below normal snowpack, though conditions were dry enough for the U.S. Drought Monitor to introduce a large area of D0 drought across these areas by the end of April.

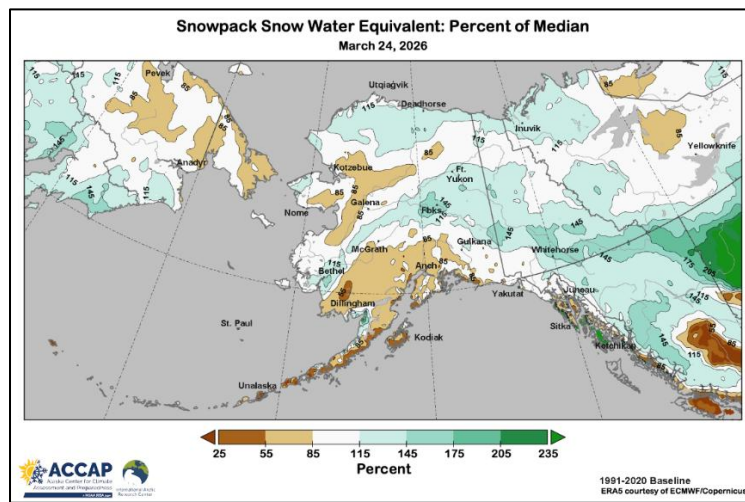


Figure 1: Snowpack snow water equivalent as a percentage of median as of March 24, 2026. Graphic credit: Rick Thoman

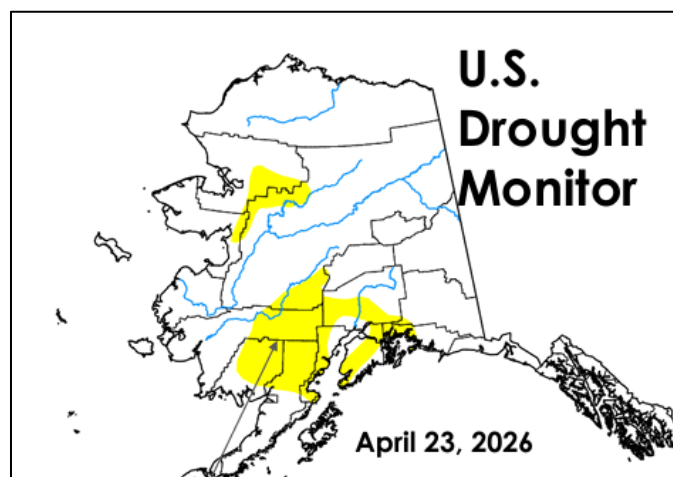


Figure 2: U.S. Drought Monitor showing a large area of abnormally dry D0 drought across southern and western Alaska as of April 23, 2026.

As May continued, broad areas of low pressure persisted across Bristol Bay and the Gulf of Alaska. The Bristol Bay systems kept southwest Alaska showery and damp. The low pressure systems in the Gulf of Alaska allowed southeast flow to keep the eastern Interior wet, and intermittent Chinook conditions dried out fine fuels in the Tanana Valley. Overall, May was cloudy and cool with some breezy periods. Red Flag Warnings for dry and windy conditions at Delta Junction were issued May 10 and 11, May 16, May 19, and May 26. Early season lightning activity took place on May 24 and 25, with 666 lightning strikes across the state on May 24 and another 547 on May 25. On May 23, a lightning strike southeast of Selawik started the Thousand Fire, which burned 408.9 acres very early in the western Alaska fire season. A ridge of high pressure built over the west for the end of May. This was a rather unusual pattern that brought dry but cool conditions there.

One other notable aspect of May was that the Yukon Flats held standing water post snowmelt through May and into June. It is unclear if this is due to frozen ground from the cold winter prior, and unknown how this would have affected fuels.



Figure 3: Standing water in the Yukon Flats between Chalkyitsik and Fort Yukon on May 27, 2026. Photo credit: Ben Ferguson

Green up occurred May 14 in Fairbanks. This is 6 days later than normal, and many areas of the state saw a delayed green up due to the cool spring. Fire Management Officers noted significantly delayed green up across the Kenai Peninsula and in the Susitna Valley, particularly near Talkeetna.

Moving toward June, a shortwave trough brought widespread wetting rain without thunderstorm activity across the central Interior on May 31 and June 1, though this same pattern brought dry and windy conditions to the Matanuska Valley and a Red Flag Warning was issued for Palmer. A ridge of high pressure behind this shortwave brought warm and dry conditions statewide for early June. An Arctic cold front dropped south on June 3 and 4, bringing windy and dry conditions behind the cold front. The Kopsheut Fire broke out near Ambler on June 4 during these windy and dry conditions, and a couple of Red Flag Warnings were issued in southwest Alaska as the cold front moved south.

After a few days of warm and dry conditions, and cool and dry airmass moved over the Interior on June 7, and was reinforced with more moisture and cold air from an Arctic trough on June 8. Accumulating snow was observed at Anaktuvuk Pass the morning of June 9 and low temperatures in the 20s and 30s were widespread north and west of Fairbanks. Conditions remained cool in the Interior through June 11.

Lightning activity began to increase on June 12 with nearly 1500 strikes. Thereafter, a ridge of high pressure built in over the east bringing warm and dry conditions and Red Flag Warnings were issued on June 13 and 14 for Delta Junction, Lime Village, and Sleetmute, and on June 14 for the Yukon Flats. Until around June 13, build-up indices were above normal across the west. After the Red Flag Warning on June 14 for the Yukon Flats, wetting rain fell overnight into June 15 reducing dry fuel concerns in that area. Conditions cooled slightly in mid-June before the ridge built back over the east on June 18 and persisted through the summer solstice weekend.

A strong shortwave moved through the ridge of high pressure from south to north during the peak of afternoon heating on June 19. This brought abundant lightning to southwest Alaska and the Sustina Valley where fuels were very dry. A Red Flag Warning was in effect for the Susitna Valley, and lightning ignited 7 fires there which were all caught at 50 acres or less. The lightning activity moved into the southern Interior on June 20 with abundant lightning persisting daily through June 27. With temperatures in the 80s early in that period, lightning ignited a number of fires including the Starry Fire near Anderson on June 20. Overnight from June 22 to June 23, a strong easterly wave brought 0.25-0.5" of precipitation south and east of Fairbanks. This dropped build up indices 20-40 points and pushed the ridge of high pressure and the focus of lightning activity to the west. A number of Red Flag Warnings, both for lightning and dry fuels and for hot, dry, and windy conditions were issued for northwest Alaska from June 24 through June 26. Lightning activity peaked on June 25 with 9251 strikes recorded in the state. Despite the abundant summer solstice lightning activity, acres burned through June 25 were the 4th lowest in the last 34 years.

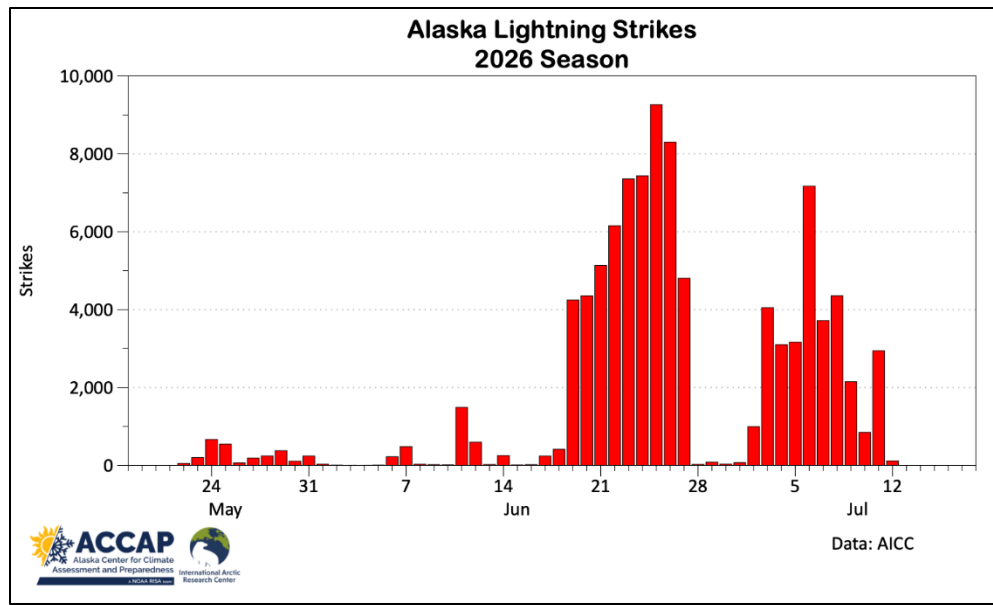


Figure 4: Alaska lightning strikes for the 2026 fire season. Image credit: Rick Thoman

Conditions became quite unseasonable beginning June 26 as precipitation moved over the entire state from two systems; one over the Yukon Delta and one in the eastern Gulf of Alaska. Wetting rains were widespread and the Yukon Flats received 0.5”-2” of rain in a 72 hour period ending through morning of June 29. This was a 5 to 10 year return interval rain event for this point in the summer and dropped indices substantially. A longwave trough moved over the state on June 28 and lightning activity decreased to minimal. Rain persisted at times over the southeast Interior through July 2. July 3 through July 11 was a period of active wet thunderstorms across the Interior. Northwest Alaska remained dry though, and 31 fires ignited from July 7 through July 10 in that part of the state. With the ridge over the north and east, southwest Alaska stayed wet with systems from the Bering Sea bringing rainfall. As the ridge moved east on July 11, a chinook pattern developed and Red Flag Warnings for hot, dry, and windy conditions were issued for the Copper River Basin while Red Flag Warnings for lightning and dry fuels were issued for the Yukon Flats, Dalton Highway Summits, and Upper Koyukuk Valley. The ridge weakened on July 12 but hung on over the east. Weak southwest flow developed elsewhere, ending the fire season for western Alaska.

On July 15, Alaska dropped to Preparedness Level 1 and there were 0 staffed fires the morning of July 16. After this point, the only significant fire potential that remained was in the Upper Tanana Valley where little lightning had been observed since late June, but also very little rainfall. Through July 22, McGrath had recorded it’s wettest January 1-July 22 on record since observations began in 1939. McGrath also experienced their coldest July in 45 years.

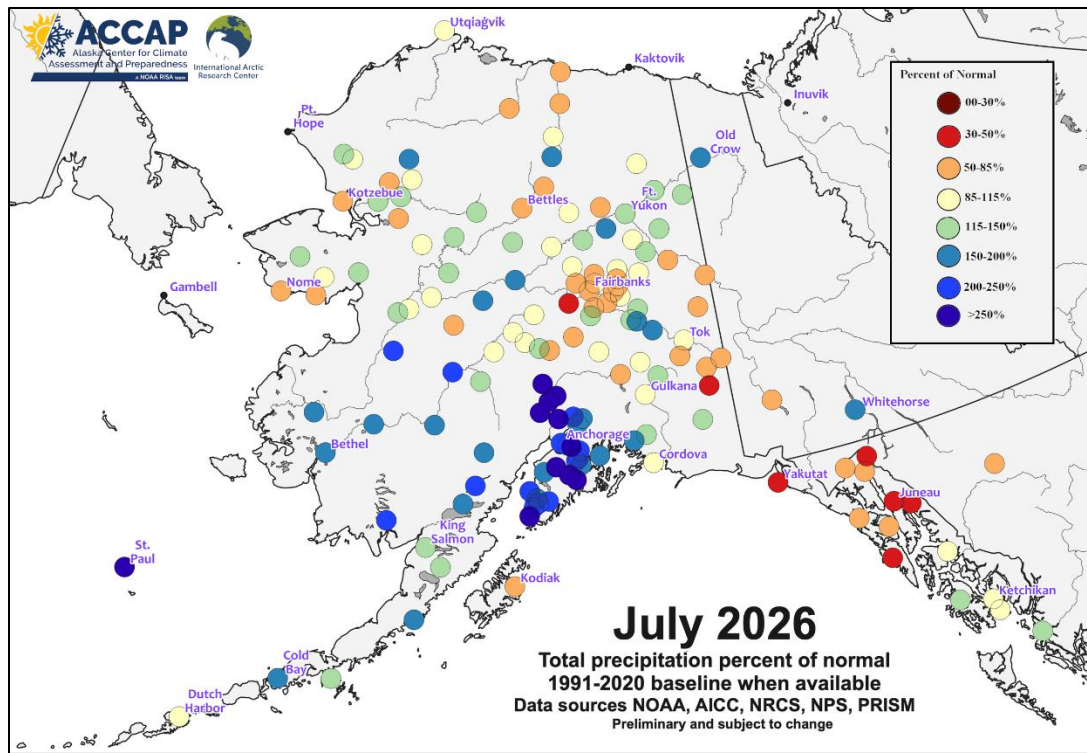


Figure 5: July precipitation percentage of normal showing drier than normal conditions across the central and eastern half of Alaska. Image credit: Rick Thoman

After a cooler period from the middle to end of July, a ridge of high pressure built back in over the central and eastern half of the state for early August and brought hot conditions with highs in the 80s through August 6 with warm conditions persisting well into the middle of the month. During this time, the west remained very wet with southerly flow bringing moderate to heavy rain across both coastal and interior areas. A chinook event on August 3 and 4 propelled the Tatlanika Fire, a fire in the Tanana Flats that started in mid-June, to grow rapidly to the northeast. Meanwhile in the Upper Tanana Valley, it was briefed on August 5 that “Duff continues to dry across the eastern Interior and Copper Basin. With no significant rain in the forecast there through next week, expect increased resistance to control.” The ridge of high pressure restrengthened on August 9 and persisted through August 18, bringing continued warm and dry conditions across the central and eastern half of the state with high temperatures well into the 70s and relative humidity dropping into the 20-30% range each day. By August 11, the U.S. Drought Monitor introduced an area of moderate drought near the Tatlanika Fire. A weak disturbance brought some wetting rain over the White Mountains and near Delta Junction on August 14, but Tok remained dry. On August 17, the Mukluk Fire ignited in Tok, exhibiting rank 5 fire behavior as it spread through the wildland-urban interface. At 0800 that morning, it was an astounding 72 degrees Fahrenheit at Cathedral Rapids and George Lake in the Upper Tanana Valley. Highs that day

in Tok were in the mid 70s with relative humidity near 25% and winds gusting to 30 mph with poor humidity recovery overnight into August 18 as winds continued. AICC went to PL2 on August 18 as a CIMT was mobilized to Tok.

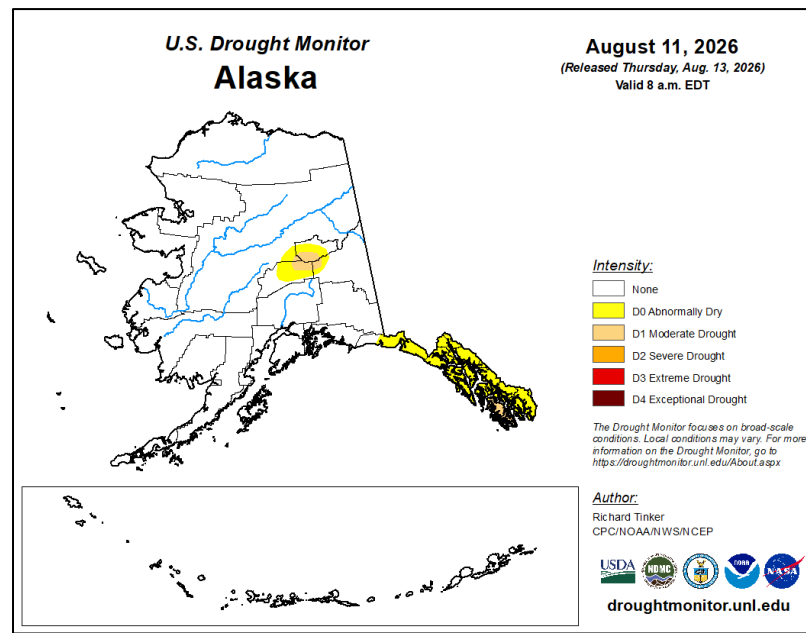


Figure 6: U.S. Drought Monitor as of August 11 showing an area of moderate drought across the Tanana Flats.

The end of August brought generally seasonable conditions, though Copper River and Tok still got very little rain well into September. In response, the Alaska Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (DFFP) extended the fire season for the Delta, Tok, and Valdez/Copper River protection areas through September 14, requiring burn permits through then. A particularly interesting note on the 2026 Alaska fire season is that over half of the approximately 89,000 acres burned this summer burned after August 1.