

# Low Snowpack, Higher Wildfire Risk?

Why this happens, and what you need to know about preparing and staying safe.



Ginny Katz, MPH- Hazard Resilience Expert  
CEO @ HazAdapt



Thomas McGinley- Forester with the  
US Forest Service



## Ginny Katz, MPH

**Founder, CEO, Community Partner | HazAdapt Inc.**

Hazard Resilience Researcher - Public Interest Technologist  
Corvallis, OR



PhD Research: Ethical Community Resilience  
Technology

MPH Global Health: Disaster Management Systems & Community  
Resilience, GIS, Digital Communication

FEMA Incident Command Systems: 100, 200, 300, 700,  
800

BS Public Health: Epidemiology, Disease Control | UTSA



## Thomas McGinley

**Forester | United States Forest Service**

District Silviculturist in Joseph, OR

**Chair** of the Blue Mountain Chapter of the  
Society of American Foresters



BS Natural Resources, Forestry | Colorado  
State University

Xi Sigma Pi Forestry Honor Society (Member)

# A Very Dry January

‘Unprecedented’ snow drought sets up extreme wildfires for Western US in 2026

Hunter Bassler | March 1, 2026



“

“Compared to historical occurrences, **we do not expect recovery of snow pack to normal level during the remainder of this season** unless unprecedented conditions materialize.”

Larry O’Neil, Director of Oregon Climate Service  
State Climatologist of Oregon  
Early Drought Warning System February 2026

”

# Low Snowpack Means: Snow Drought

**Early water release from  
mountains, lower reservoir supply**



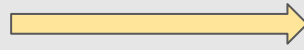
**Elevated dryness**



**Earlier and longer fire season**

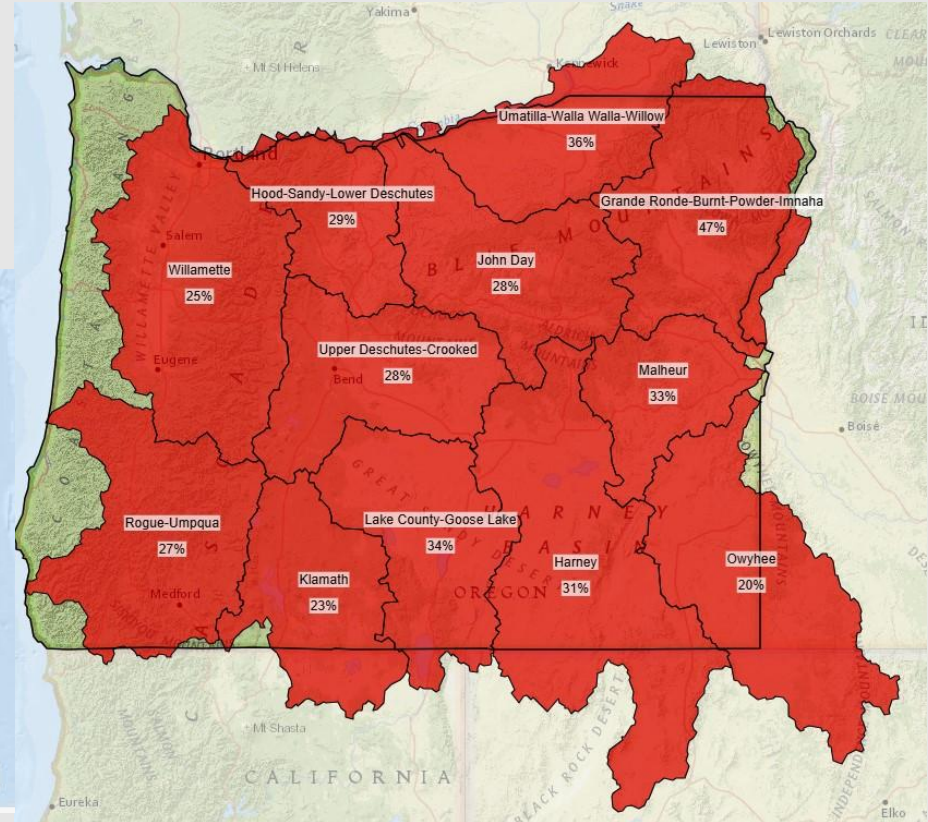
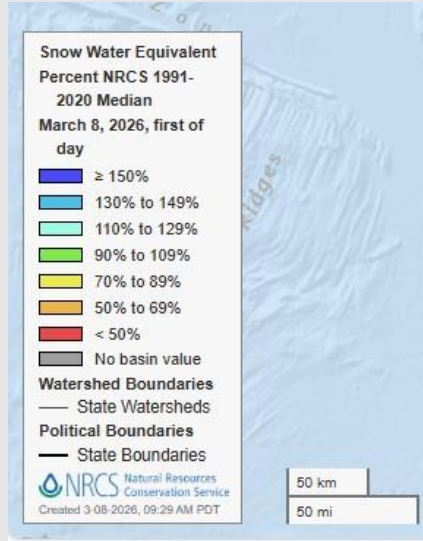


# Lower Snowpack



# Current Conditions

## Snow Water Equivalent (SWE)



# Elevated Dryness

Longer Drought Conditions

Higher susceptibility to other disturbance

Lower forage availability

More ignitions



# How do I know this is real?

## Signs Outside

Landscape and vegetation drying out turning brown earlier than normal.  
Stressed trees: Fading and brown tree crowns when they normally would be green

## Signs In The News

How quickly they ban

1. campfires
2. burning at camp grounds
3. burning in backyards



## Signs and Signals from Trustworthy Sources:

Where to watch for changes and status updates:



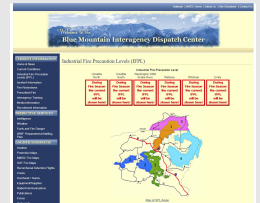
[National Interagency Fire Center:](#)  
[The Nation's Wildland Fire Support Hub](#)




[Oregon Emergency Management:](#) [State of Oregon Fires Dashboard](#)




[Industrial Fire Precaution Levels Map](#) | [Blue Mountain Interagency Dispatch Center](#)




# Wildfire Impact: Earlier and Longer Fire Season

 Spring, Summer, Fall ignitions


Consistently dry fuels throughout season, higher susceptibility for ignitions

 Higher fire intensity



 Larger acreage of fires


 Strain on fire fighting resources


 Earlier precautionary restrictions and lasting longer


 Higher risk of human caused fires

# Wildfire Impact: Our Ability To Fight Wildfires and Protect Communities

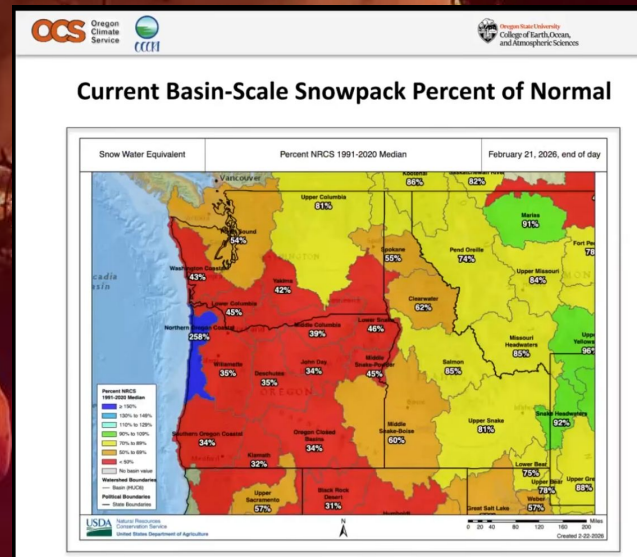
  Limits the window to safely set prescribed burns during the spring.

 Impact our water supply to fight fires.

 Calling for backup: Inter-state fire crews may not be as available to come and assist with our fires.

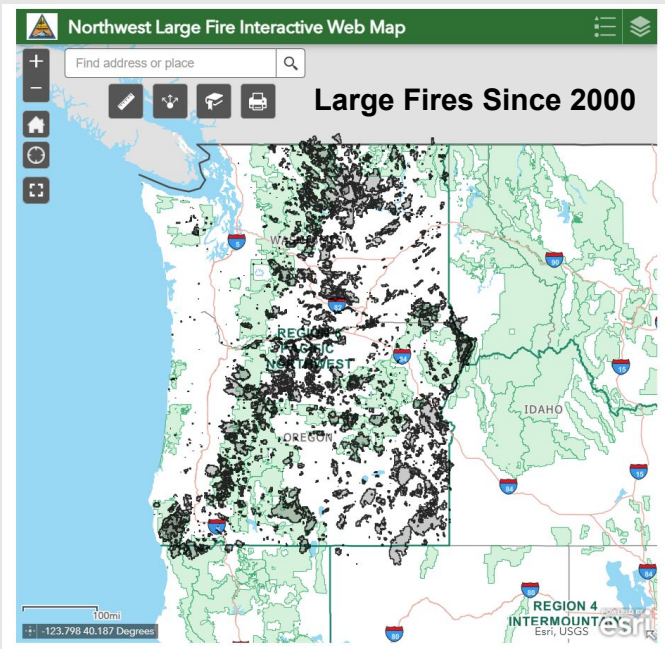
 Fires will move faster in drier conditions, impacting

- Time to respond and get ahead of the fire
- Alerting the community
- Evacuation



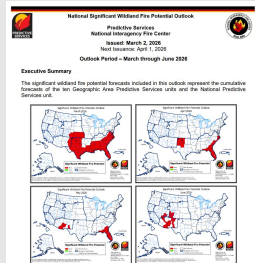
## What You Need to Know About Eastern Oregon Wildfire Risk:

# If it's drier, wildfire risk is higher.



[Large fire perimeters compiled and maintained by NWCC starting in 2000 and updated annually. These are only large fires and complex fires that appeared on the Daily Situation Report. Layer is time-enabled on Date Conversion field.](#)

**As of 3/8/26:** Normal Wildfire Potential Forecasted for the PNW till May (National interagency Fire Center)



EMPLOYEE

## Less acreage burned in Oregon's 2025 wildfire season, but more ignited by humans

Fewer acres burned in 2025 compared to last year, but more structures burned and humans started the bulk of fires

BY: ALEX BAUMHARDT - OCTOBER 22, 2025 6:00 AM



Firefighters work to stop the Flie Fire near The Dalles that started on Aug. 21, 2025. (Photo courtesy of the Oregon State Fire Marshal's Office)



# Wildfire Risk: Human Factors

- 85% of wildfires in the U.S. are caused by humans
  - Unattended campfires
  - Burning debris
  - Equipment malfunctions
  - Discarded cigarettes
  - Powerlines
  - Fireworks
  - Arson



# Preparing for Wildfire Emergencies

1.

Evacuation Ready: Alerts, Go-Kits, and Plans



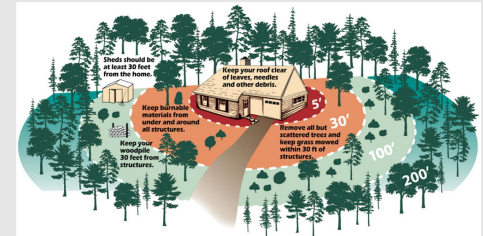
2.

Breathing and Body Protected From Smoke



3.

Home and property



# Let's make wildfire preparedness easier!



# !hazadapt

Emergency &  
Disaster Safety App



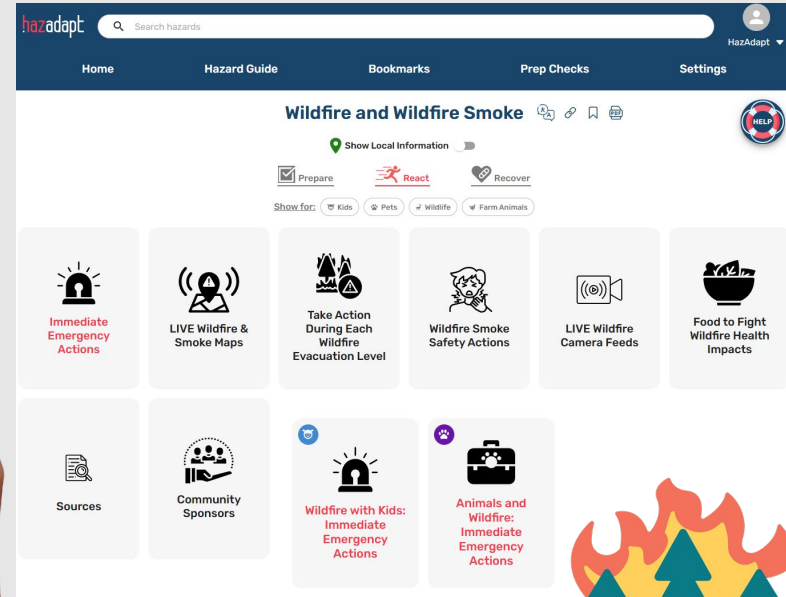
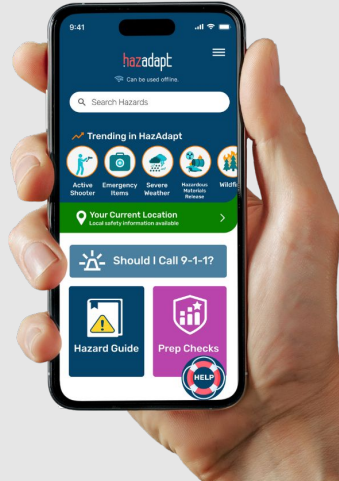
Prepare



React



Recover



# Evacuation Ready: What to Pack

## Go-kits packed with necessities for you and each family member:

- Copies of important documents
- Copies of medical prescriptions and extra medications
- N95 Mask
- Fire blanket
- Eye protection, sturdy work gloves
- Other face covering (Scarf, bandanna, or clean cloth)
- Sturdy boots or shoes
- Non-perishable snacks, water
- Cell phone charger and spare battery
- Pet and animal food, bedding, meds, and paperwork



**☀️ Goal:** You won't have to rush to the store for supplies when an emergency is coming. If you need to evacuate quickly, you can grab what you need and get to the car in moments.



Available in  
**hazadapt** ✓



Emergency Item  
Checklists for people  
and animals.

# Have Multiple Ways to Get Alerts and Stay Up to Date



- **State, County, and City** emergency alerts.
- Know where your county or area posts fire and evacuation updates.
- Text, call, email, safety apps - pick a few best for you!

## Recommended Tools:

[Live OR- Alert State Emergency Alert Tracker](#)

**BE READY. BE SET. GO NOW!**

Know evacuation levels and follow advice of emergency officials. Make the best decision for your safety. Don't wait to evacuate if you feel unsafe!

**LEVEL 1 BE READY**  
PREPARE TO EVACUATE  
BE AWARE OF DANGER IN THE AREA

- ✓ Stay informed.
- ✓ Have your plan & go-kit ready.
- ✓ Act early if you or your loved ones can't move quickly.

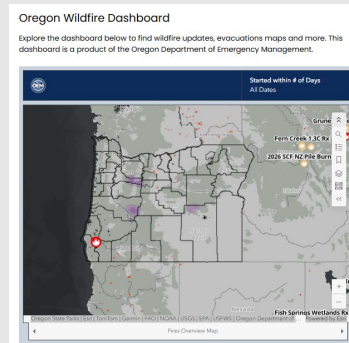
**LEVEL 2 BE SET**  
BE SET TO EVACUATE  
AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE  
SIGNIFICANT DANGER IN THE AREA

- ⚠ Follow your evacuation plan & grab your go-kit.
- ⚠ Check news & radio for updates.
- ⚠ Conditions change rapidly. Leave if you feel unsafe.

**LEVEL 3 GO NOW!**  
LEAVE IMMEDIATELY!  
EXTREME DANGER IN THE AREA

- 🚫 Leave without delay. It is unsafe to stay.
- 🚫 Do not stop to gather belongings or protect your home.
- 🚫 Do not return until officials announce the area is safe.

## Official Map: Oregon Wildfire Dashboard



**Watch Duty: Wildfire Maps**  
Wildfire Maps & Alerts  
Free · In-App Purchases  
Share

Available in **hazadapt** ✓  
Find your local alerts

# Making a Plan: Ready to Stay at Home or Evacuate

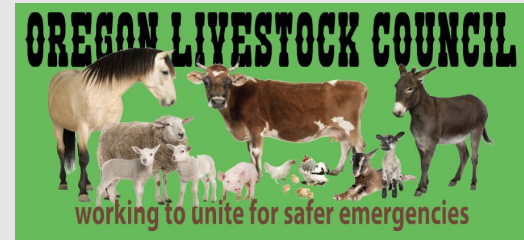
## Plan for the humans

- **Plan to stay inside**, safe at home (2 Weeks Ready)
- **Evacuation plan:** Where will you go? How will you get there?
- **Plan for no power.** Public Safety Power Shut Offs or Blackout Zones to prevent ignition from power lines

## Plan for the animals

- Keeping them safe at home with poor air and weather conditions
- Evacuating and boarding
- Communicating with your teams and community

*Every preparedness plan should start from a point of **power outage.***



# Protecting Your Breathing and Body

## Breathing in wildfire smoke can cause:

- Coughing
- Trouble breathing
- Asthma attacks
- Stinging eyes
- Scratchy throat
- Runny nose
- Irritated sinuses
- Headaches
- Tiredness
- Chest pain
- Fast heartbeat
- Make it easier to get sick



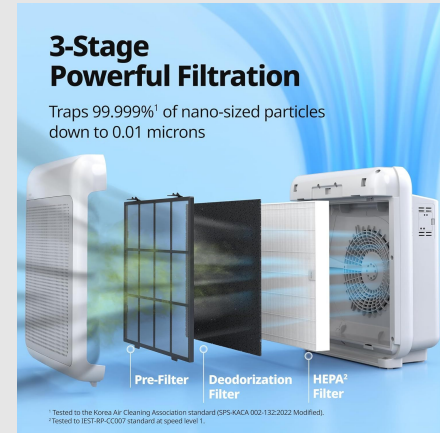
**Outdoors? Mask Up.** An N95 or a mask with P100 or PM2.5 filtration will offer the most protection from wildfire smoke.

**Air filters.** Find options with a HEPA filter made for PM 2.5. Create a clean air bubble in your home.



## [Air Quality Index \(AQI\) Map](#)

Rule of thumb:  
AQI above 100 is harmful for kids.  
AQI above 150 is a sign to keep your windows closed and avoid outside if you can.

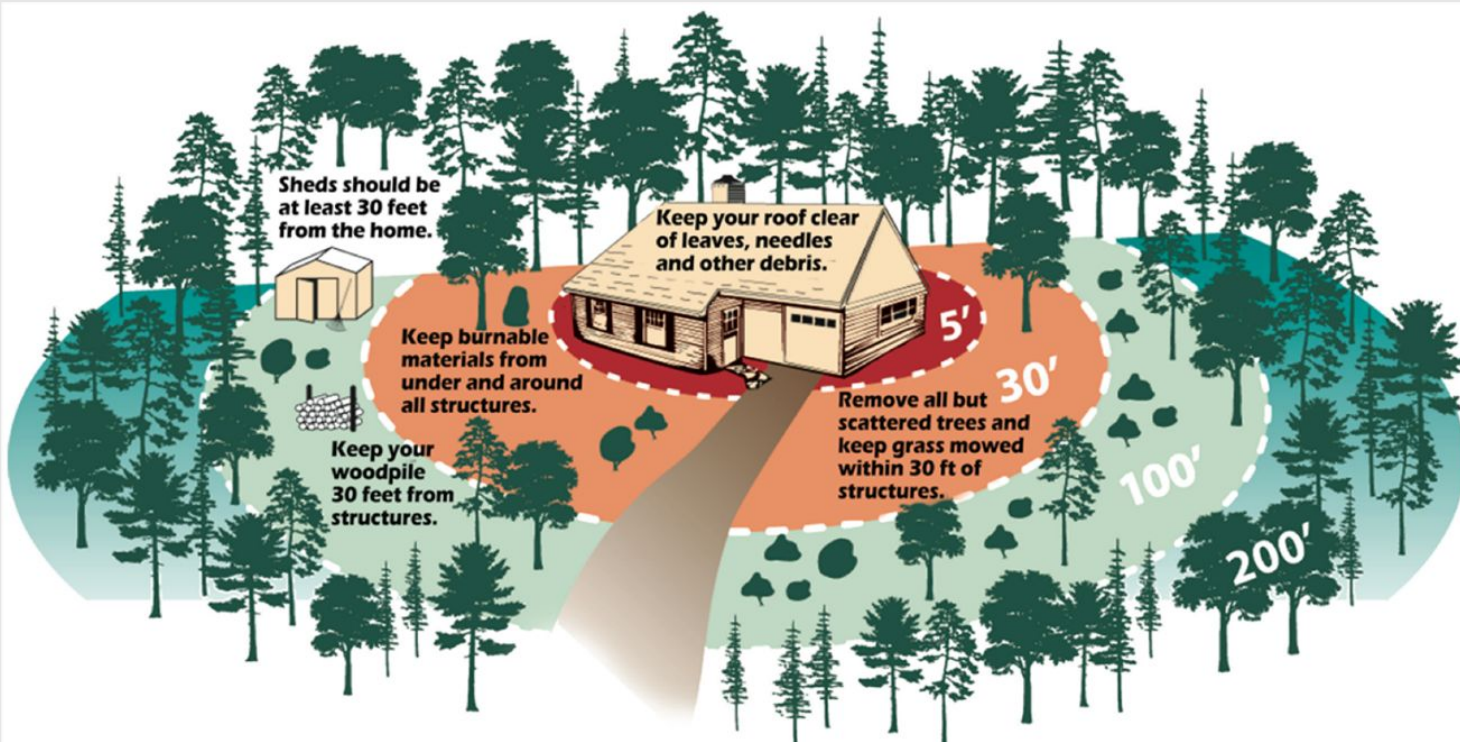


Available in  
**hazardapt** 



AQI & Wildfire Smoke Safety  
Actions for people and animals

# Prepare your property : Defensible Space



**OREGON**  
DEFENSIBLE SPACE

[Get a FREE local defensible space assessment with OSFM!](#)

# Prepare your property

## OREGON DEFENSIBLE SPACE & BEST PRACTICES



For trees and vegetation more than 18 feet tall, remove branches six feet from the ground. For trees and vegetation less than 18 feet tall, remove branches up to 1/3 the height of the tree. Trees and vegetation should be 10 feet from other trees. [OREGON Defensible Space Homeowners & Renters](#)

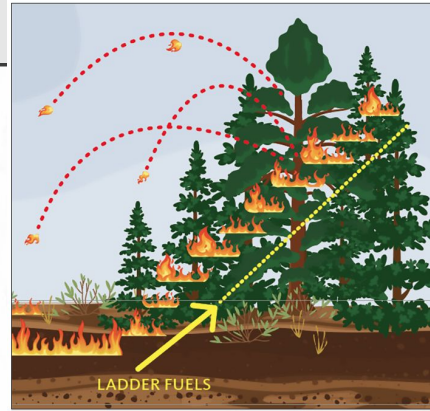
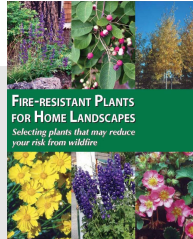


Figure 5. Ladder fuels are flammable materials that allow fire to spread up into the canopy of a tree, which can create windblown embers.

Credit: Christina Frieauff

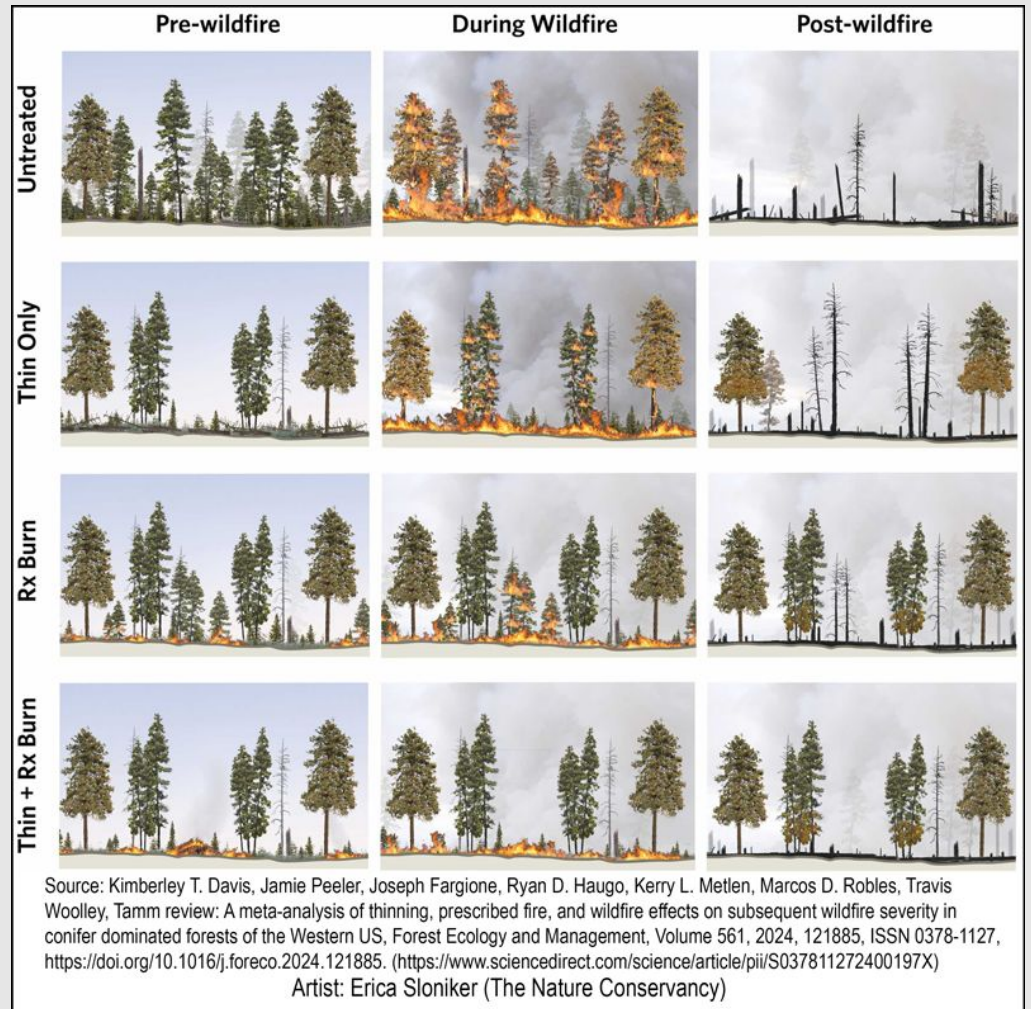


1/8th inch wire mesh for vents and decks is best.

Considering home sprinklers? Check in with you local fire and utility first!



# Prepare Your Property: Private Burning

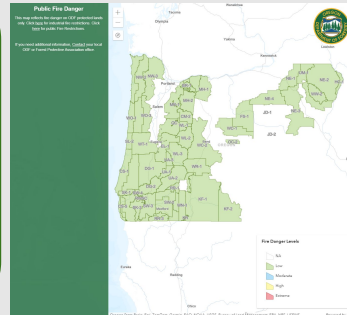


# Private Burning

1. Check if you need a burn permit.
2. Watch for updates in conditions for approved days.

Tools to find out if it's safe to burn:

- City and County Websites
- [Public Fire restrictions map](#) + Email updates from ODF
- [Bureau Land Management- Fire Restrictions](#)
- [Prescribed fire liability in Oregon- OSU Extension Services](#)



## First wildfire of the year sparks near Boardman, Oregon

Isaiah Bernal NonStop Local Multi-Media Journalist Mar 4, 2026 Updated Mar 4, 2026



Officials have labeled this incident the first wildfire of the year, serving as an early reminder of the potential fire risks in the months ahead. Fortunately, no homes or infrastructure were threatened when crews arrived.

The fire began as a controlled burn on private farmland but became uncontrolled. ([NBC March 4, 2026](#))

# What We Can Do: Debris burning

## Before burning:

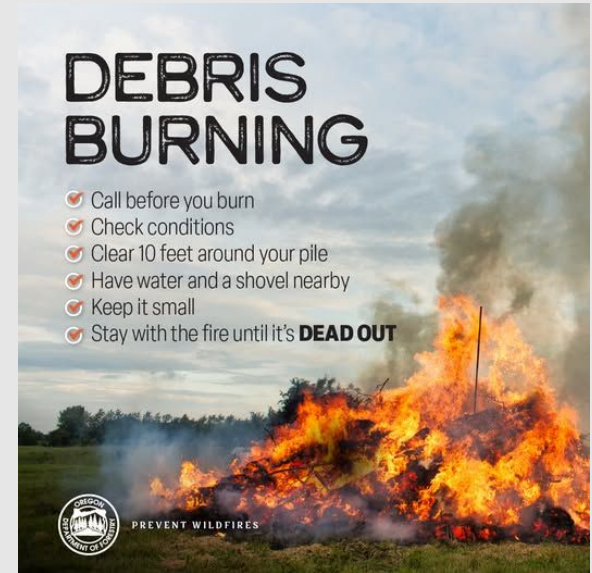
- **CHECK:** do you need a permit? Check with your local fire agency.
- **CHECK:** weather forecast and wind patterns
- **Plan for small burn piles:** 4 ft wide x 4 feet high.
- **Clear a 10-foot radius** around your burn pile or barrel down to bare soil.
- Cover burn barrels with 14-gauge, 1/4-inch (or smaller) wire mesh.
- 

## While burning:

- Burn only yard debris, not trash.
- Use ready-made fire starters or paper and kindling to start your fire. Never use gasoline.
- Always have water and a shovel on hand. Stay by the fire until it is out.
- Call 9-1-1 if the fire escapes control.

## After burning:

- Make sure your **burn pile is completely out** before leaving.
- Keep an eye on where you burned. Check the area over the next several weeks to make sure there is no heat or smoke.



## Can't burn?

- Cover your burn pile with a tarp and wait until it is safe to burn.
- Chip, compost, or haul debris to a yard debris recycling site.

# What We Can Do:

- Avoid Sparking Equipment
- Take care with traveling
- When camping
- Cooking outside



## Preventing human-causes of wildfire



More step-by-step wildfire prevention tools and tips.

**ONE LESS SPARK**   
**ONE LESS WILDFIRE** 

**CAUSED BY: HOMEOWNERS**

**Use the Right Equipment**  
Use string vegetation trimmers to cut tall, dry grass. 

**Remove Rocks**  
Remove rocks from dry grass or weeds. Metal mower blades hitting rocks start wildfires. 

**Be Ready!**  
Have water and a fire extinguisher readily available. 

**Only You Can Prevent Wildfires.**  
 **HAVE WATER AND/OR A FIRE EXTINGUISHER AVAILABLE AND KNOW HOW TO USE THEM.**

**ONE LESS SPARK**   
**ONE LESS WILDFIRE** 

**CAUSED BY: HOMEOWNERS**

**Chainsaw Spark**  
Ensure chainsaws and other equipment have approved spark arrestors. Have a fire extinguisher ready. 

**Cutting, Welding, and Grinding**  
Grind, sharpen, and weld on a paved enclosed area. 

**Report All Fires CALL 9-1-1**  
Report location, what is burning, how fast it is moving, how tall are the flames, what is in danger, stay on the phone. 



The Federal Government is an equal opportunity service provider and employer.  
May 2014

The most important thing you can do to be prepared:

**Stay connected with your community.**



Additional Eastern Oregon Community Groups



# Thank you! Questions?



Ginny Katz, MPH- Hazard Resilience Expert  
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US Forest Service



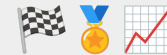
# Supplementary Info



## Let's take a few minutes to check our preparedness for: **Wildfires**

1. Go to **Prep Checks**
2. Select the **Prep Check** and answer the three questions:

- ✓ Do you know what to do?
- ✓ What tools do you have now?
- ✓ Who would you call for help?

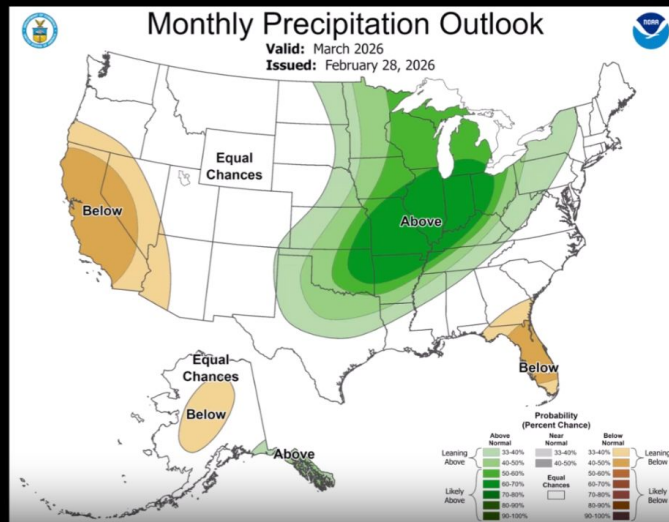
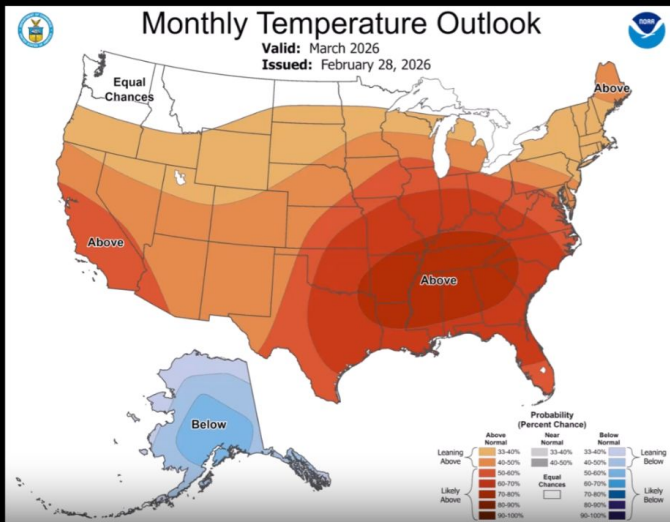


3. See your preparedness score and what you can improve!

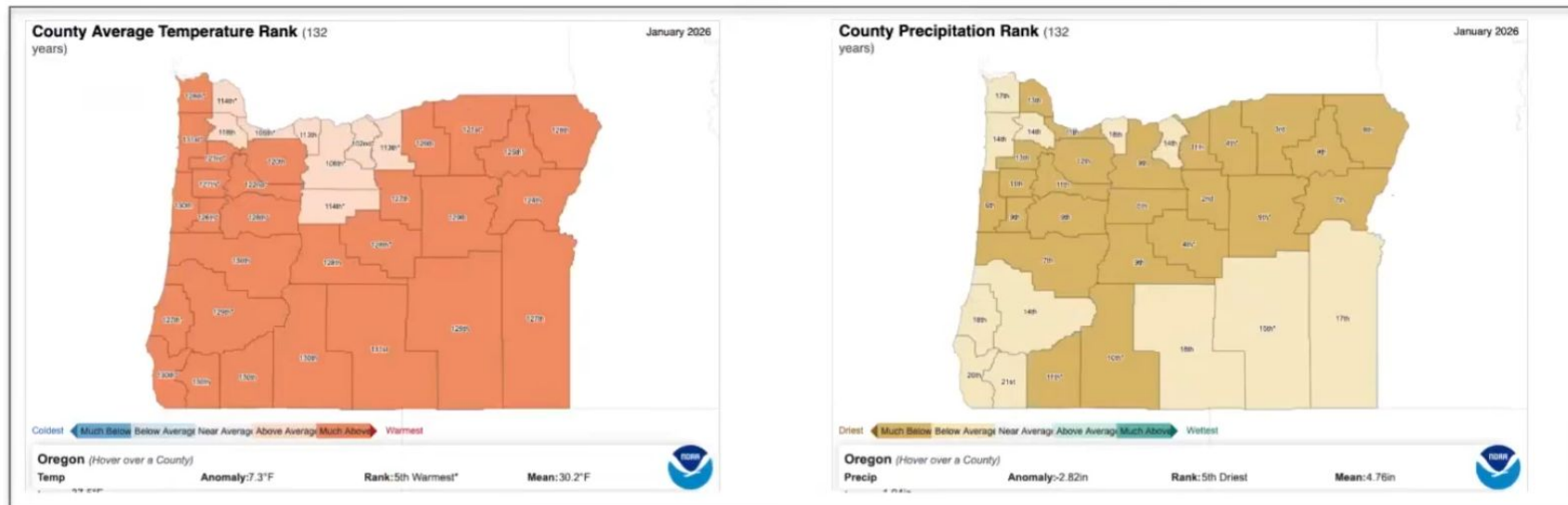


<https://app.hazadapt.com/prep-checks>

# Climate Prediction Center March Outlook



# Oregon Statewide Precipitation and Temperature Rankings



*Oregon experienced its 5<sup>th</sup> warmest and 5<sup>th</sup> driest January on record*