



California's Drought: More Wildfires, Higher Food Prices



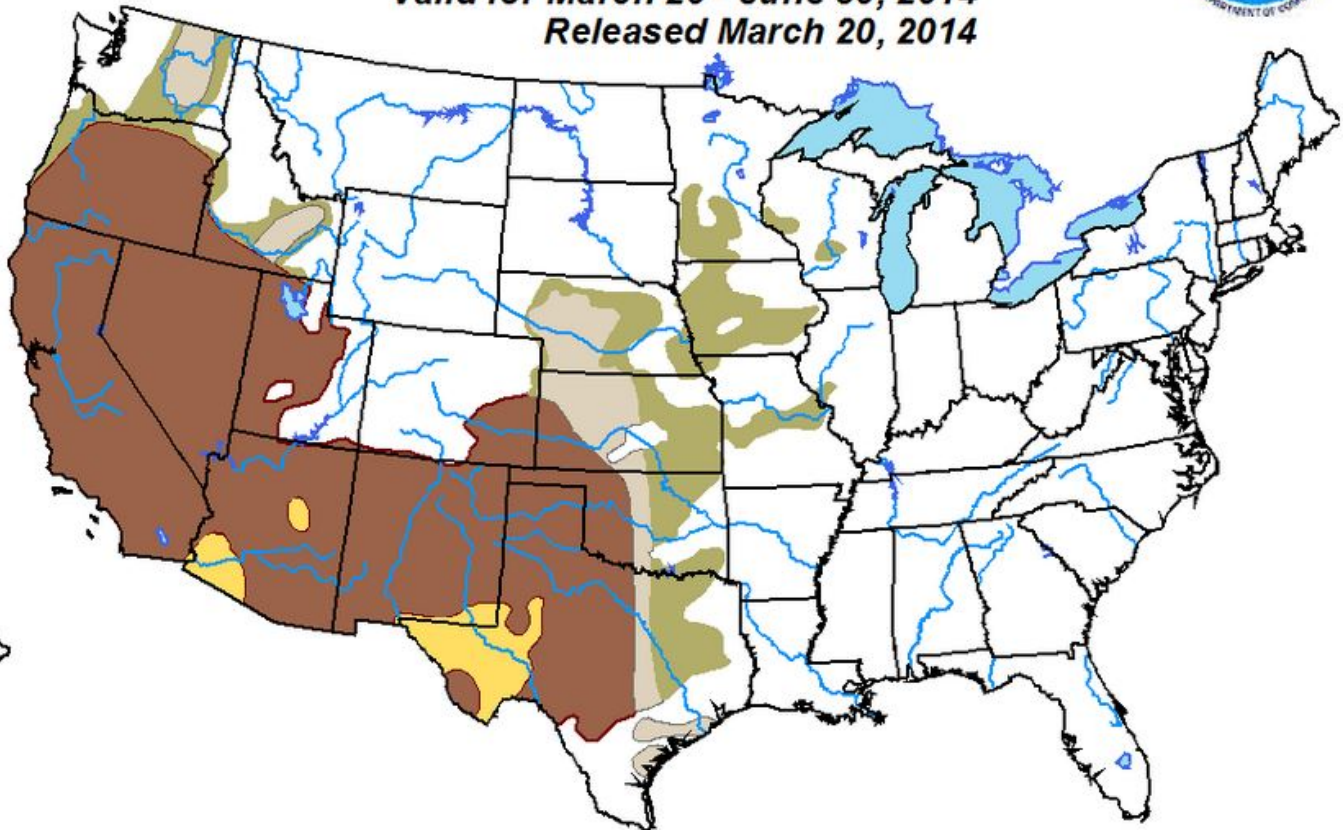
The American West saw a few rainstorms this past month, but it's been like sprinkling water on a heated cast-iron skillet. Severe drought persists across many states and, looking ahead, the arid conditions will likely remain or grow even worse.

That's the bleak assessment from [NOAA's Climate Prediction Center](#), which has released its outlook for this spring. This CPC map shows in brown where forecasters see drought either persisting or intensifying. Areas drawn in tan represent a slight improvement in drought, whereas olive green means great improvement and yellow is where new droughts could develop:

U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook

Drought Tendency During the Valid Period

Valid for March 20 - June 30, 2014
Released March 20, 2014



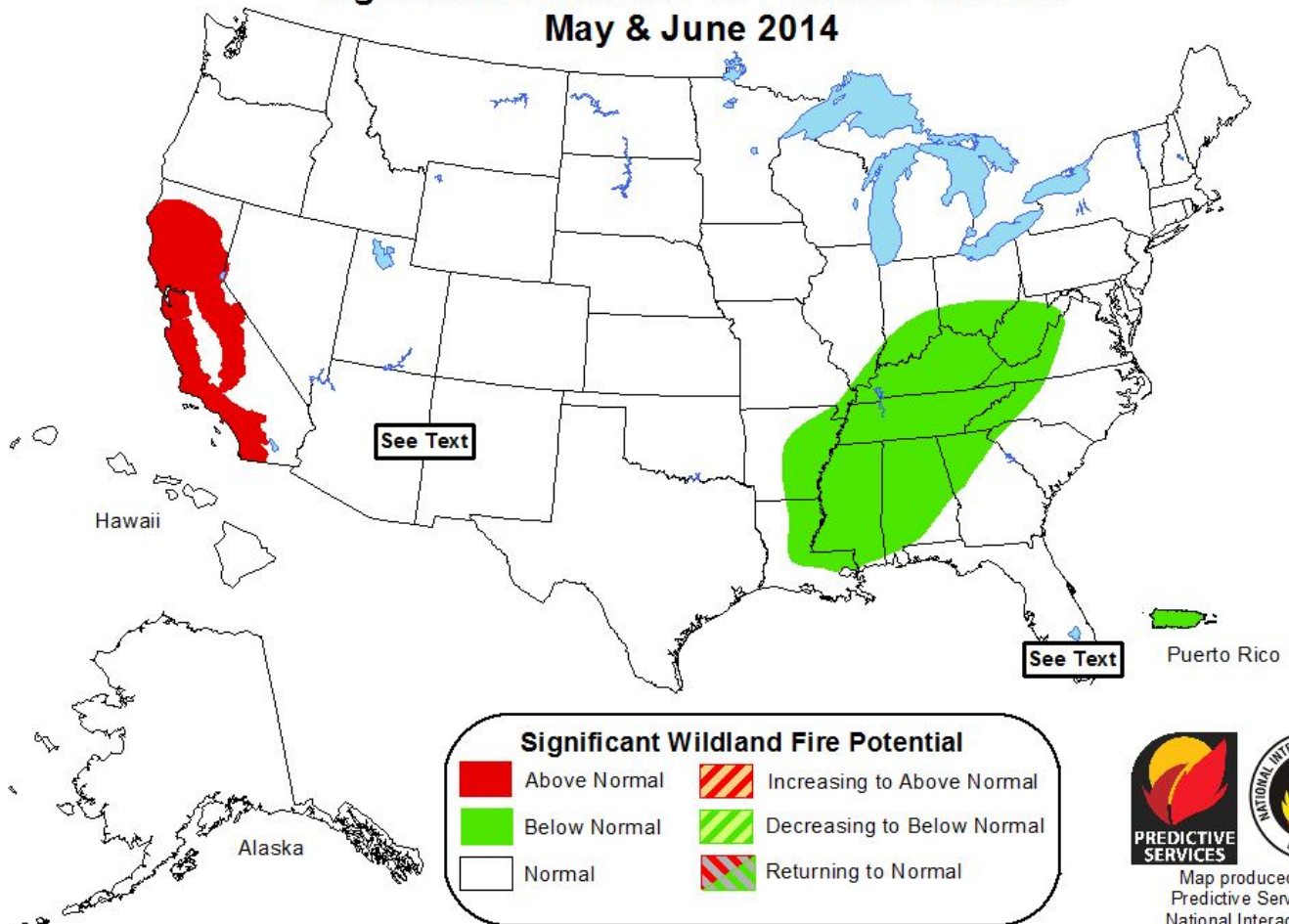
NOAA drops a few details on what could be in store for America:

Significant and widespread drought conditions continue in California which experienced its warmest and third driest winter on record. Drought is expected to persist or intensify in California, Nevada, most of interior Oregon and Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, southeast Colorado, western Oklahoma, and most of west Texas because of below-average rain or snow this winter and the onset of the dry season in April.

How might an undying zombie drought disrupt life in the West? There are a few ways:

- **Wildfires:** California experienced [truly ferocious](#) wildfires last year. If things remain this dry, 2014's wildfire season could be especially nasty, too. An area of "significant" fire potential is predicted to grow bigger and bigger throughout California over the coming months, according to the [National Interagency Fire Center](#). By early summer, it looks like about half the state might be at above-average risk for fires, not a great thing for the camping industry or anybody with homes in dry zones:

Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook May & June 2014



Above normal significant wildland fire potential indicates a higher than usual likelihood that wildland fires will occur and/or become significant events. Wildland fires are still expected to occur during forecasted normal conditions as would usually be expected during the outlook period. Significant wildland fires are still possible but less likely than usual during forecasted below normal periods.



Map produced by
Predictive Services,
National Interagency
Coordination Center
Boise, Idaho
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- **Food prices:** Roughly 50 percent of America's fruits and vegetables come from California, but the fecund Central Valley lately has been more suitable for a [tumbleweed](#) preserve. Farmers are letting their fields go fallow and ranchers are thinning herds rather than pay for expensive feed, measures that wind up slamming consumers. In the past year, the average price for a hamburger has risen by 20 percent, and the costs of milk, cheese, and other dairy products will also be vulnerable to hikes, according to an analyst interviewed by the [Sacramento Bee](#).

The real worry, however, is what will happen if this drought doesn't go away soon, writes the *Bee*:

It could get a lot worse. Experts say most farmers should be able to keep going this season, but many of them won't be able to survive another season of drought.

"The general mood is, 'We'll get through this year, but who knows about next year?'" said Erik Balling of Green Leaf Ag, a Coalinga irrigation-services company. "If there's another severe drought, the face of farming is going to change."

- **Water rationing:** With reservoirs turning into [dust bowls](#), California has made the unprecedented decision to [not supply water](#) to many urban and agricultural agencies this spring. Other federal agencies that channel water to the state are also cutting back in huge ways. If the drought persists, it's hard to imagine a future California in which people are not constantly scrambling to preserve the precious little water left. Governor Jerry Brown hinted at the hard road ahead in a speech on Wednesday, [reports the AP](#):

"We're going to emphasize water conservation and water recycling and managing the water below the ground and above the ground," he said. "So that's the big topic today. We're in the middle of March, and it feels like July. And so we know what our work is."

Top photo: The dry bed of the Stevens Creek Reservoir on March 13 in Cupertino, California. (Marcio Jose Sanchez / Associated Press)