Colorado Springs Utilities
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Wildfire Quarterly Outlook – Q4 2026

Executive Summary

Wildfire activity across Colorado is expected to decline through late fall and early winter. However, drought conditions, dormant fuels, and seasonal wind events will continue to present wildfire concerns, particularly across the eastern plains of El Paso County and along the Front Range.

Recent precipitation improved conditions in southern portions of the state, but long-term moisture deficits remain, and drought continues to affect much of the northern Front Range. A strong El Niño is expected to persist through the winter, increasing the likelihood of additional moisture and snowpack development, though periods of elevated fire danger will remain possible between storm systems.

Q3 Summary

Wildfire activity declined during the third quarter as cooler temperatures and increased precipitation began to emerge across Colorado. While recent moisture provided localized drought relief, much of southern Colorado entered Q4 with continued vegetation stress and moisture deficits. National fire activity also decreased significantly during September, allowing preparedness levels to return closer to seasonal norms. So far in 2026, Colorado Springs has spent 141 days under some level of fire restriction issued by the City Fire Marshal.

Wildfire Conditions

El Paso County

Recent precipitation has improved short-term fuel moisture conditions, but drought remains present. Fine fuels, particularly cured grasses, remain capable of supporting rapid fire spread during periods of low humidity and strong winds. As temperatures cool, the primary wildfire threat shifts from large forest fires to fast-moving grass fires and human-caused ignitions. Areas of greatest concern continue to include:

- Interstate 25 corridor grasslands
- Black Forest and adjacent WUI communities
- Monument and northern El Paso County
- Eastern El Paso County grasslands and rangelands
- Critical utility infrastructure corridor

Watershed Conditions

Critical source-water watersheds throughout southern Colorado continue to recover from drought, below-average runoff, and vegetation stress experienced earlier this year. Although winter weather should reduce large-fire potential, post-fire flooding, erosion, and sediment transport remain concerns in previously burned areas. Protecting watershed health and water infrastructure remains a key wildfire management priority.

Winter Grass Fire and Chinook Wind Outlook

The most significant wildfire threat during Q4 is expected to come from winter grass fires associated with Chinook wind events.

The highest-risk period typically extends from November through March, when dormant vegetation, extremely low humidity, low precipitation, and strong downslope winds can align to create critical fire weather conditions. Chinook winds can rapidly dry fuels and produce extreme rates of fire spread even during the winter months.

The Marshall Fire remains the most notable example of this risk. Although overall wildfire potential decreases during winter, fast-moving grass fires remain possible when strong winds coincide with critically dry fuels. With a strong El Niño forecast for this winter, periodic warm, dry, and windy conditions should still be expected between weather systems.

Q4 Outlook

El Paso County

Wildfire potential is expected to remain near seasonal levels through the fourth quarter. Large forest fires are unlikely; however, wind-driven grass fires remain a credible threat. The greatest concern will be short-duration periods of elevated fire danger associated with Chinook winds, frontal passages, and extended dry periods.

Statewide

Across Colorado, wildfire potential should continue to decrease as winter weather becomes more frequent. The developing El Niño pattern increased moisture and potential drought relief throughout the winter. However, drought remains widespread, and meaningful improvement will depend on sustained precipitation and snowpack development over the coming months.

Fire managers should continue anticipating periodic elevated fire-weather conditions, particularly across grasslands, lower elevations, and areas vulnerable to downslope wind events.

Preparedness Status

- Catamount Wildland Fire Team remains fully staffed and available for response.
- Wildfire mitigation efforts continue throughout the electric service territory and forested watersheds using risk-based prioritization.

- Coordination with local, state, and federal emergency response partners remains ongoing.
- Monitoring of drought conditions, winter fire weather, and long-range climate forecasts continues.

Leadership Considerations

Although wildfire activity is expected to decrease during Q4, wildfire risk has not ended. A high-consequence wildfire scenario this winter would be a wind-driven grass fire affecting developed areas along the Front Range. Continued attention should be given to drought conditions, Red Flag Warnings, fuel conditions, and Chinook wind forecasts through March 2027. The combination of dry fuels and extreme wind events remains the primary driver of wildfire risk for Colorado Springs Utilities and the surrounding region.

Reference Graphics

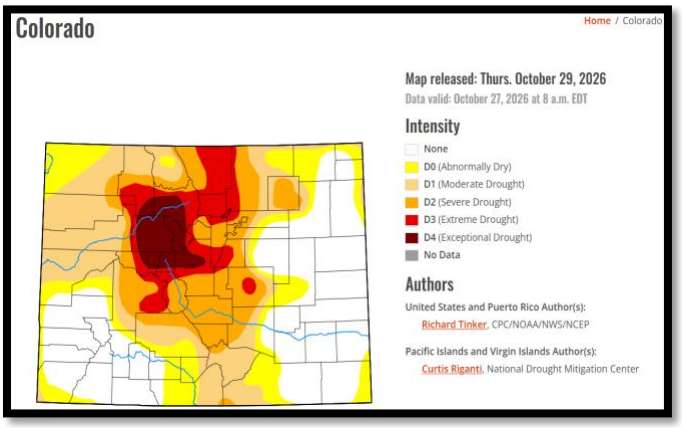


Figure 1 (above): Drought indicator displaying drought conditions for the counties near headwaters of the raw water systems specifically in Summit, Eagle, and western Park Counties.

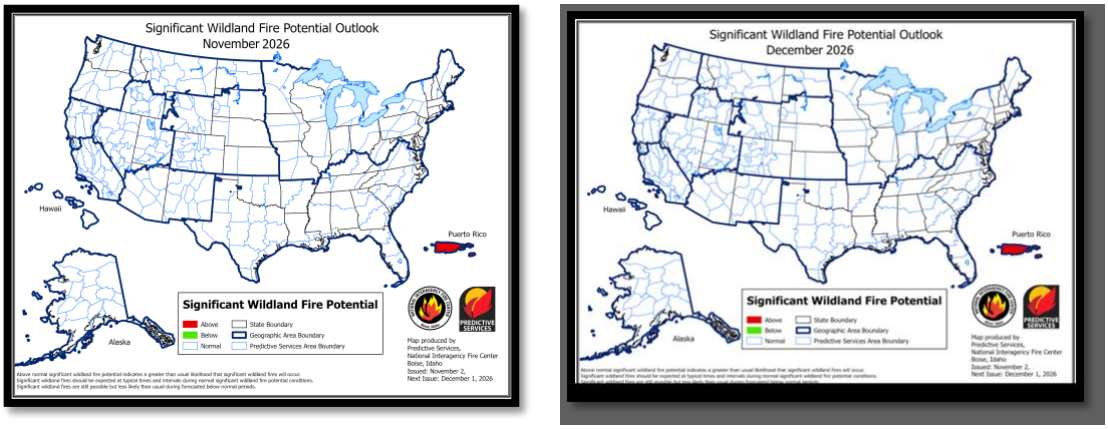


Figure 2 (above): Predictive services indicate normal fire weather outlooks for the months of November and December. This enables fire response crews to remain local and available for local emergency events.

References

- National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) National Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook [nifc.gov], [nifc.gov]
- NOAA Climate Prediction Center ENSO Diagnostic Discussion and Seasonal Outlooks [cpc.ncep.noaa.gov], [cpc.ncep.noaa.gov], [cpc.ncep.noaa.gov]
- NOAA Winter Outlook 2026-2027
- U.S. Drought Monitor
- Drought.gov Colorado and El Paso County Conditions [drought.gov], [drought.gov]