DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

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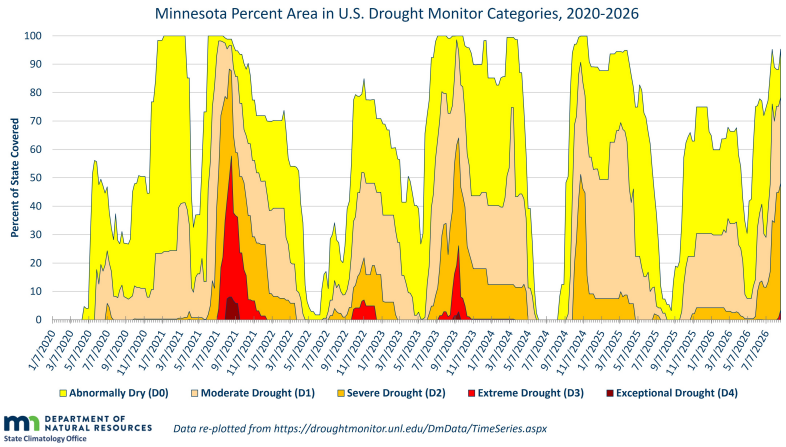
Drought Returns, Again

A combination of long-term precipitation shortages and primarily dry summer conditions, punctuated by shorter-term heat waves and dry spells, brought widespread drought conditions back to Minnesota during the summer of 2026.



(https://images.dnr.state.mn.us/natural_resources/climate/journal/Drought_MN_2020s)
Graph showing areal coverage of U.S. Drought Monitor categories in Minnesota through the 2020s.
Graph recreated from https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/DmData/TimeSeries.aspx

Drought conditions had affected parts of northern and extreme southwestern Minnesota during the winter and spring of 2026, but most of the state had enough precipitation to avoid drought or even "abnormally dry" designations through the first several months of the year. May 2026 became the 9th driest on record (out of 132 years), and included two relatively hot and windy days that led to wildfires in northeastern Minnesota (/climate/journal/fire-weather-may-15-16-2026.html), along with increased concerns over drought expansion.

June and early July presented mixed hydroclimatic signals, with some areas growing drier and others becoming much wetter. A rare mega-rain in southeastern Minnesota (/climate/journal/mega-rain-flash-flood-july-2-2026.html) on July 1-2 was the first in the state since 2020. Near the border with Canada, however, June and early July had been very dry. These areas then bore the brunt of a significant mid-July heat wave (/climate/journal/heat-mid-july-2026.html), which resulted in significant wildfires that ended up releasing record smoke pollution (/climate/journal/extreme-smoke-july-2026.html) across Minnesota.

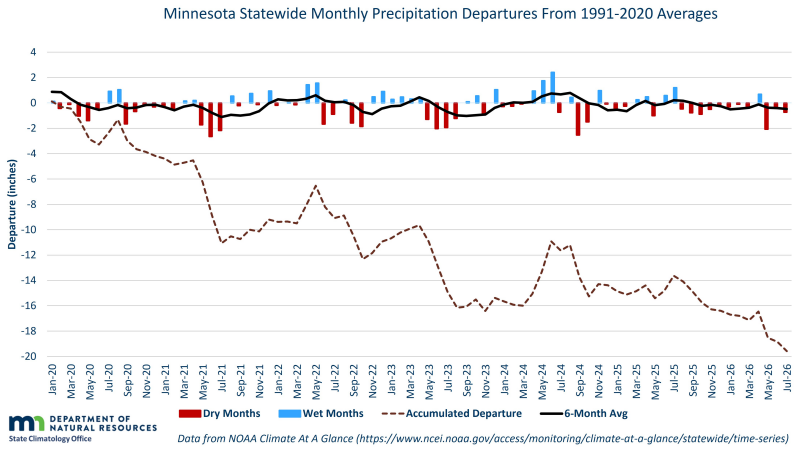
In late July and August, the mixed pattern continued across the state, but generally favored drought expansion. While some parts of the north improved or at least received enough rain to keep from worsening the drought, parts of the central and south became

much drier than they had been, with August (likely) finishing among the driest on record at many stations. As of late August, over 75% of Minnesota was in drought, with nearly half of the state in "severe" drought (also known as D2) and small pockets in "extreme" drought (D3). Current drought conditions in Minnesota can be found here (/climate/journal/drought_monitor.html).

Multiple Scales of Dry Conditions

In the image at the top of this page, we see the proportion of Minnesota covered by U.S. Drought Monitor categories since January 2020. The first major statewide drought episode this decade occurred in 2021, when during August virtually the entire state experienced at least moderate drought conditions (D1), with extreme (D3) conditions affecting half of the state. So far, that episode has been the worst of the 2020s. However, drought conditions have affected the state each year since then. The peak in both areal coverage and intensity (as represented by drought categories) has tended to occur during late summer or autumn, usually in response to large precipitation deficits accumulating during the summer, which is normally our wettest time of year. Since 2021 and including 2026, only 2025 did not have a late summer or autumn drought peak in Minnesota.

The drought of 2026 has not occurred in isolation, and may have been compounded by previous droughts this decade. The image at the top of this page shows clear peaks and dips. In those dips, wet conditions had temporarily reduced or even wiped out the drought. Indeed, it's been very wet at times this decade, with parts of the state experiencing significant and even historic flooding. That said, in the never-ending push and pull between dry and wet conditions, the dry ones have had the advantage during the 2020s. In the middle and latter 2010s, the opposite was true.



(https://images.dnr.state.mn.us/natural_resources/climate/journal/MN_precip_deficits_2020s)
Graph showing statewide-averaged monthly and accumulated precipitation departures from normal during the 2020s, with increasing deficits apparent over time, reaching nearly 20 inches through July 2026. Note that these are areal averages for for Minnesota and may not reflect deficits (or even surpluses) observed at specific locations.
Based on NOAA data obtained at https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/monitoring/climate-at-a-glance/statewide/time-series.

To illustrate the potential compound effect of previous droughts this decade on the 2026 drought, we can look at the statewide precipitation departures from averages each month during the 2020s,

shown in the second graphic. The upward, blue bars are wet months and the downward red bars represent dry months. Visually, they appear to be closely matched. However, when we accumulate the total precipitation departures (shown as the dashed line) we see that on average, Minnesota has accumulated an average deficit of nearly 20 inches of precipitation since January 2020. The sharp drops seen during 2021 and 2023 represent major escalations of drought conditions. After the 2023 episode, the statewide hydroclimate was relatively stable until 2026, when the decadal precipitation deficit started increasing again.

Not the Same Everywhere

Dry conditions have dominated the 2020s in Minnesota but some areas have been much drier, or wetter, than others. This map (https://images.dnr.state.mn.us/natural_resources/climate/journal/precip_departure_map_2020s)shows the spatial pattern of wet and dry departures from normal across Minnesota from January 2020 through July 2026. Relative to recent historical averages, the largest deficits through July 2026 have been in southwestern Minnesota, near Duluth westward across the state, and in north-central and northeastern Minnesota near the Canadian border. Along and near the Minnesota River, however, many communities are running precipitation surpluses of 10 inches or more for the decade. Thus, drought has been common across Minnesota during this decade, but it has not been spread equally across the state.

Posted August 27, 2026

KAB

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