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Snow drought presents climate stress test



ILLUSTRATION BY HOLLY MAHAFFEY/USA TODAY NETWORK; GETTY IMAGES

Low snowpacks bring worries about water, wildfires

Alejandro N. Flores
Boise State University
THE CONVERSATION

Across much of the Western United States, winter 2026 was the year the snow never came.

Many ski resorts got by with snow-making but shut down their winter operations early. Fire officials and water supply managers are worried about summer.

Where I live in Boise, Idaho, temperatures hit the low 80s Fahrenheit in mid-March. The same heat dome sent temperatures soaring to 105 F in Phoenix.

Ordinarily, water managers and hydrologists like me who study the Western United States expect the mountain snowpacks to be at their fullest around April 1. Snowpacks are natural reservoirs of water that farms and communities depend on through the hot, dry summer. Their snow water equivalent, meaning the amount of liquid water in the snowpack, is seen as a bellwether for water supplies.

But the 2026 water year has been anything but ordinary. In fact, its snow drought has few historical analogs. Data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation

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A recent assessment of drought conditions from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Integrated Drought Information System suggests 2026 will be a tight year for water supplies.

MARIO TAMA/
GETTY IMAGES



A key concern is whether the historic snow drought is setting up the West for a bad fire season. That's still an open question. JEFF TOPPING/GETTY IMAGES

Iran reopens Strait of Hormuz

Trump says naval
blockade to continue

**Zac Anderson, Christopher Cann,
Andrea Riquier and Michael Loria**
USA TODAY

Iran declared the Strait of Hormuz "completely open" to commercial vessels April 17 – then threatened to again close the global shipping lane if the United States did not end its blockade on Iranian ports and ships.

It was the latest back-and-forth between the warring countries as the clock wound down on a delicate two-week ceasefire.

Iran's foreign minister, Seyed Abbas Araghchi, declared the waterway open after a separate 10-day ceasefire between Lebanon and Israel went into effect April 16.

The United Nations' maritime transport agency said it was verifying whether the strait was open. U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres described the reopening as "a step in the right direction," writing on X, "I also hope that, together with the ceasefire, this measure will contribute to creating confidence between the parties and strengthen the ongoing dialogue."

President Donald Trump thanked Araghchi but said the blockade would

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Report: Fewer global travelers coming to U.S.

Kathleen Wong
USA TODAY

Despite more people taking international trips globally, the United States is losing ground as a top destination, according to new data.

Last year was one of the best years for the travel and tourism sector, with a 4.1% increase in gross domestic product growth, according to the World Travel & Tourism Council's latest economic impact research, sponsored by Chase Travel.

There were 80 million more international travelers in 2025 than in 2024. But many of them are skipping the United States for other locales.

In 2025, North America was the slowest-growing market globally, with the United States rising by less than 1%, WTTC's research found. Meanwhile, the Asia-Pacific region skyrocketed by 8.2% in 2025.

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