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[Health, Science & Environment](#)

Thanks to heat waves, the drought relief of Utah's wet winter may soon be over

KUER 90.1 | By [David Condos](#)

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Ross D. Franklin/AP Hikers enjoy the cool waterfall at Lower Calf Creek Falls at Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument, July 12, 2023, in Escalante, Utah.

Drought is back in the forecast for much of Utah.

While the state's exceptionally wet winter provided [temporary relief](#), extreme heat and a delayed monsoon season are accelerating drought's return.

The new [seasonal outlook](#) from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicts drier conditions could cover roughly half of the state by the fall. The forecast map shows drought developing over nearly all of southern and eastern Utah, from Zion National Park to Flaming Gorge Reservoir to the Four Corners.

Adam Hartman, the NOAA meteorologist who wrote the forecast, said the region is already beginning to see the signs.

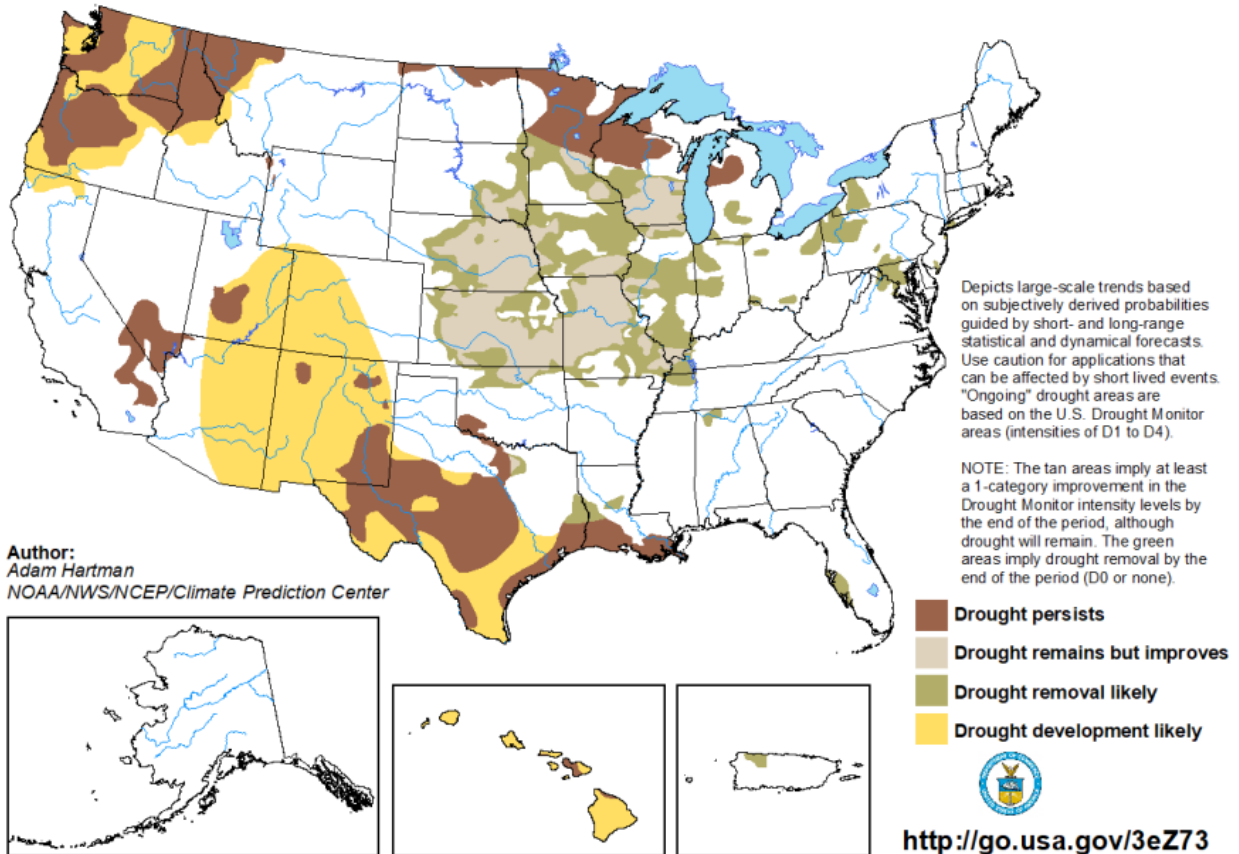
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Soil moisture levels have begun to dry up. Streamflows are starting to drop off. It shows just how quickly things can change in the dry West.

“All the benefits that come from an above-normal winter season have started to diminish and even reverse in some cases,” he said.

U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook **Drought Tendency During the Valid Period**

Valid for July 20 - October 31, 2023
Released July 20



NOAA

The yellow shaded portion of this NOAA map shows where drought is expected to develop across Utah by October.

Recent [heat waves](#) across Utah have sped things up, increasing the evaporation from soil and [reservoirs](#). And the extreme heat likely isn't over. Long-term outlooks expect [above-average temperatures](#) to continue across southern and eastern Utah into the fall.

“Over the next month or so, if you're still seeing below-average precipitation, I would expect to start seeing that those drought areas really expand,” Hartman said.

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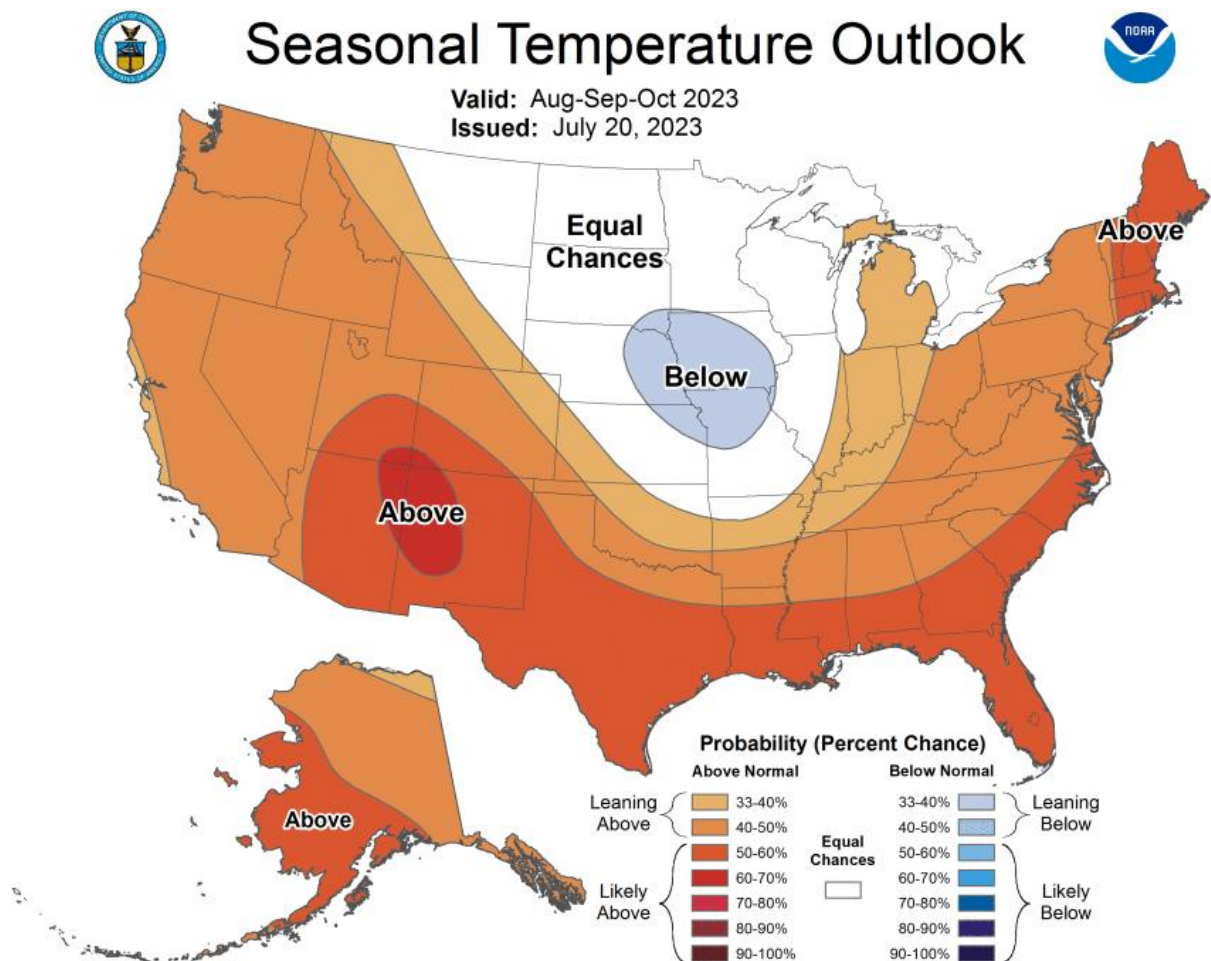
The [U.S. Drought Monitor](#), which Hartman also authors reports for, has already begun illustrating the effects of drought creeping back into Utah.

In mid-July as high temperatures [soared over 100 degrees](#), the monitor expanded an area of abnormally dry conditions — the level just below drought — to cover much of Grand and San Juan counties in southeast Utah.

On top of the heat, the Southwest monsoon season that typically arrives in July has been delayed — largely thanks to the wet winter keeping ground temperatures cool — and will likely not deliver as much total rainfall as it normally does.

That's a big deal, he said, because the summer monsoon season is one of the two main times the Southwest catches precipitation each year (the other comes during the winter).

“If you don't receive rainfall during one of those two periods ... you miss out,” Hartman said. “That's it, you know, you've missed your shot.”



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This map from NOAA shows how above-average temperatures are likely for much of southern and eastern Utah over the next few months.

The return of drought would spell bad news for the state's already precarious water supply.

Utah Division of Water Resources Director Candice Hasenyager said her big concern is the wet winter may have made some Utahns complacent when it comes to keeping up with conservation efforts.

"We all feel really good right now. ... Reservoirs are higher, groundwater levels are improving," Hasenyager said. "So the hardest part is then all of us feel like, 'Oh, we can use water and do the things we've always done.'"

If Utahns use less water now, she said, that would help stretch supplies for whenever the next drought arrives. That means looking at all kinds of ways to cut back — from homeowners [ditching more turf grass lawns](#) to cities keeping a closer eye on [water metering](#) to farmers [reducing irrigation](#).

But even if Utah develops more drought in the coming weeks, she said, it's still starting off in a better place than it was a year or two ago because it's sitting on the foundation of the wet winter.

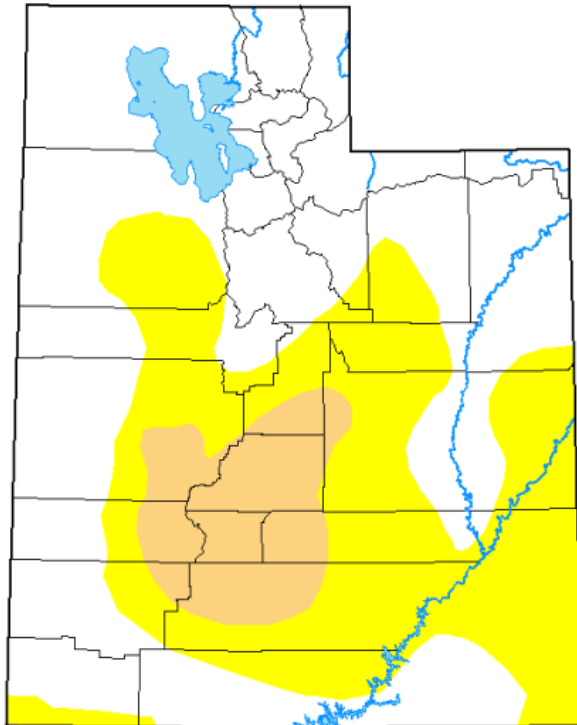
This time last year, every inch of Utah's land was experiencing some level of drought. Today, drought covers [less than 10%](#) of the state.

U.S. Drought Monitor Utah

July 25, 2023

(Released Thursday, Jul. 27, 2023)

Valid 8 a.m. EDT



Drought Conditions (Percent Area)

	None	D0-D4	D1-D4	D2-D4	D3-D4	D4
Current	56.45	43.55	9.70	0.00	0.00	0.00
Last Week 07-18-2023	56.56	43.44	9.70	0.00	0.00	0.00
3 Months Ago 04-25-2023	37.11	62.89	19.26	5.09	0.00	0.00
Start of Calendar Year 01-03-2023	0.77	99.23	96.89	86.75	27.59	1.91
Start of Water Year 09-27-2022	0.00	100.00	100.00	95.73	56.39	3.63
One Year Ago 07-26-2022	0.00	100.00	100.00	99.65	83.56	7.76

Intensity:

None	D2 Severe Drought
D0 Abnormally Dry	D3 Extreme Drought
D1 Moderate Drought	D4 Exceptional Drought

The Drought Monitor focuses on broad-scale conditions. Local conditions may vary. For more information on the Drought Monitor, go to <https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/About.aspx>

Author:

Brian Fuchs
National Drought Mitigation Center



droughtmonitor.unl.edu

US Drought Monitor

The state's reservoirs, excluding Lake Powell and Flaming Gorge, are now [83% full](#). Last year, she said, they were just over half-filled. The winter's extra moisture also recharged some groundwater supplies — a vital long-term drought indicator.

"It definitely won't be as bad as last year," she said. "We definitely have a buffer there."

So even if Utah develops more drought, it'll be of the short-term variety, at least initially. That means it would be easier to potentially reverse the drought if the state gets enough moisture this coming winter.

Also, seasonal weather predictions aren't set in stone. For instance, NOAA's Hartman pointed out that forecasts expected this past winter to be dry in Utah. The state ended up seeing [record-breaking snowpack](#) instead.

Yet in the face of a decades long [megadrought](#) across the West, it'll take more than one winter — however wet it may be — to change Utah's long-term trajectory.

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Even when the state is not in a drought, Hasenyager said, Utahns should always be preparing for the next one.

“Drought or no drought, we live in one of the driest states in the nation,” she said. “So we always need to use our water wisely and look for opportunities to reduce how much water we use.”



David Condos

David Condos is KUER’s southern Utah reporter based in St. George.