

2026 WILDFIRE SEASON IN THE INTERMOUNTAIN WEST

A WWA RAPID ASSESSMENT

OCTOBER 2, 2026

BABYLON FIRE SMOKE
COLUMN IN UTAH, LATE JULY
2026.

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NATIONAL FOREST



**WESTERN WATER
ASSESSMENT**

A NOAA RISA TEAM AT CIRES
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER



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Regional Integrated Sciences
and Assessments

2026 Wildfire Season in Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming

October 2, 2026

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Executive Summary

Purpose of the report: This report provides an assessment of wildfires in Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming during the 2026 wildfire season through September 15, 2026. We provide descriptions of the wildfire events, the role of climate and weather in 2026, and preliminary impacts from the wildfires, including structures burned, poor air quality and post-fire flooding. This report was written and reviewed during September 2026, so all impacts reported occurred as of the publication date.

Key Findings:

- As of October 2, 907,392 acres were burned by wildfire in Colorado, Utah and Wyoming, with 530,959 acres burned in Utah (3rd most since 1984), 318,399 acres burned in Colorado (5th most), and 58,034 acres burned in Wyoming.
- Nine of the ten largest regional wildfires started in a late June outbreak of wildfire fueled by hot and windy weather, ultimately burning 542,000 acres.
- Six firefighters were killed fighting two regional wildfires during 2026.
- The Aspen Acres Fire in Colorado and Cottonwood Fire in Utah were responsible for burning a combined 1,000 structures, including over 464 homes.
- \$605 million was spent on wildland firefighting in the region, distributed among Colorado (\$345 million), Utah (\$250 million), and Wyoming (\$20 million).
- 27 communities were within 5 miles of a 2026 wildfire, affecting an estimated 47,000 people; 54 communities were within 10 miles of a 2026 wildfire, affecting 191,000 people.
- Two periods of poor air quality due to wildfire smoke impacted the region, causing exposure to unhealthy air pollution for several hundred thousand regional residents.
- Record-low snowpack and early snowmelt in Colorado and Utah during 2026 intensified long-term drought and caused elevated fire danger by June.
- Relatively active monsoonal thunderstorms during July and August helped firefighting efforts but caused damage and a fatality from debris flow flash flooding on the Aspen Acres Fire in Beulah, CO and the Cottonwood Fire in Beaver, UT.

2026 Wildfire season

Record low snowpack throughout much of the West during 2026 set the stage for a very active wildfire season, compounded by frequent occurrences of hot, dry, and windy weather in the summer. In Utah, the 530,615 acres burned in 2026 ranked as the third most annual burn area in the state since 1984 (the first year of comprehensive satellite monitored wildfire impacts)^{1,2}. In Colorado, the 313,168 acres burned in 2026 represented the state's fifth highest year of area burned on record^{3,4}. The extent of wildfire burning in Wyoming was much less than the other two states, with one wildfire larger than 10,000 acres burned and a total of 51,136 acres burned.¹

Four very large wildfires accounted for nearly half of the 907,392 acres that burned in Colorado, Utah and Wyoming. The Babylon, Cottonwood, and Widemouth 2 Fires in Utah burned a combined 334,394 acres and the Aspen Acres Fire in Colorado burned 102,004 acres. A total of 26 large wildfires (fires >5,000 acres) burned in Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming; the 16 wildfires larger than 10,000 acres are listed in Table 1. Forests were the predominant landscape type that burned in 2026, with 193,000 acres of forest burned in Colorado and 344,000 acres of forest burned in Utah. Grassland fires burned 103,855 acres across the three-state region.

Table 1. Wildfires larger than 10,000 acres during 2026 in Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming.

Fire	Size	State	County	Start date	Red flag	Evacuations
Widemouth	129,741	UT	Millard	7/27	no	Yes; Kanosh, Rural residents (RR)
Babylon	107,189	UT	San Juan	6/26	yes	Yes; Cynlands NP
Aspen Acres	102,004	CO	Custer/Huerfano/Pueblo	6/29	yes	Yes; Beulah, Rye, CO City, RR
Cottonwood	97,464	UT	Beaver/Piute	6/22	yes	Yes; Eagle Point, RR
Ferris	64,881	CO	Montezuma/Dolores	6/27	yes	Yes; RR
Iron	41,842	UT	Juab/Millard / Utah	6/19	yes	Yes; Eureka, RR
Gold Mt	39,718	CO	Ouray	6/27	yes	Yes; Ouray, RR
Cherry	34,252	UT	Juab/Millard	6/26	yes	Yes, Eureka, RR
Snyder	28,264	CO/UT	Mesa/Grand	6/26	yes	Yes; RR
Hastings	26,423	UT	Tooele	6/20	yes	No
Rocky Cyn	16,464	UT	Morgan/Summit	8/8	no	Yes; Henefer, RR
Sharpe	16,240	CO	Baca	5/15	no	No
Weiser Knoll	15,817	WY	Fremont	8/9	no	Yes; RR near Lander
Wild Goose	12,665	UT	Millard	6/26	yes	Yes; RR near Scipio
Stookey	11,881	UT	Tooele	7/10	no	No
Brushy Canyon	10,002	UT	Box Elder	8/26	no	No

Climate and Fire Weather

Snow drought

Low 2026 snowpack conditions, early snowmelt, and record-high temperatures led to extremely dry conditions by June. On April 1, 2026, snow was completely melted at monitoring sites near 12 of the 14 wildfires that burned in the mountains. Peak

snow water equivalent (SWE) at sites near 2026 large wildfires occurred nearly a month early, ranged from 26-57% of average, and Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming all observed record-low statewide SNOTEL SWE (Table 2^{5,6}). These snow drought conditions paired with

Table 2. Snow water equivalent (SWE)⁶, November 2025 - July 2026 temperature⁵, November 2025 - June 2026 precipitation⁵ and July - Aug 2026 precipitation near the ten largest regional wildfires of 2026.

Fire	Apr 1 SWE	Rank lowest	Nov-Jul Temp (F)	Rank hottest	Nov-Jun precip	Rank driest	Jul-Sep precip
Widemouth	0%	1/41	+4.7°	1/117	45%	1/97	51%
Babylon	0%	1/41	+5.6°	1/96	68%	22/85	156%
Aspen Acres	17%	1/35	+5.5°	1/68	63%	8/70	66%
Cottonwood	0%	1/46	+4.4°	2/100	68%	2/46	119%
Ferris	0%	1/46	+3.3°	1/81	83%	27/79	32%
Iron/Cherry	0%	1/48	+3.4°	2/50	33%	1/52	92%
Gold Mtn	0%	1/46	+3.9°	1/76	63%	4/81	84%
Snyder	0%	1/45	+5.7°	1/126	55%	7/126	39%
Hastings	0%	1/46	+4.3°	1/129	37%	1/96	105%
Colorado	22%	1/40	+4.8°	1/131	67%	4/131	89%
Utah	19%	1/46	+5.5°	1/131	68%	13/131	163%
Wyoming	50%	1/46	+5.5°	1/131	71%	9/131	142%

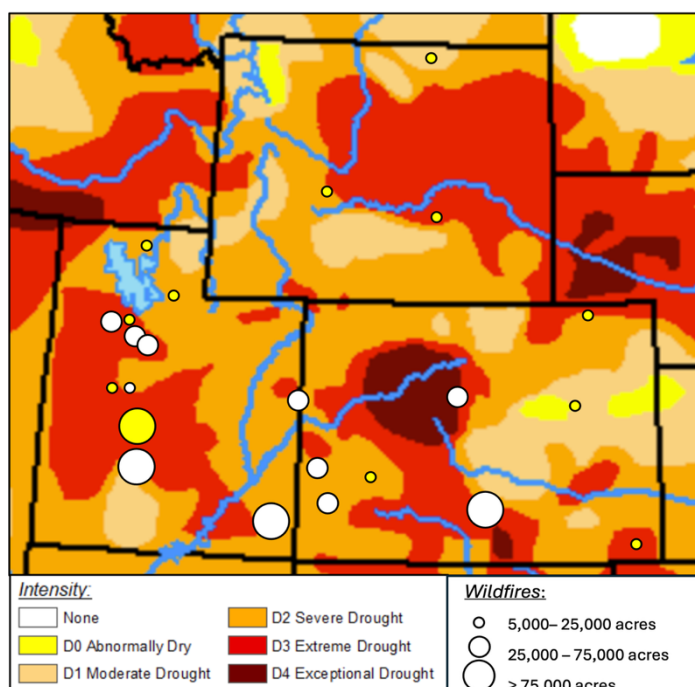


Figure 1. Map of wildfires >5000 acres in CO, UT, and WY during 2026. Wildfire location and relative size are mapped on US Drought Monitor conditions from June 23, 2026. White circles indicate the wildfire started from June 19-29; yellow circles indicate all other start dates.

anomalously high temperatures led to low seasonal moisture content of soils and vegetation drying in late spring and early summer. This seasonally low moisture across the landscape amplified the wildfire risk during the early summer relative to the same time in previous years when melting snow would normally still be providing moisture across the Intermountain West.

Hot and dry start to the summer

While SWE was record-low across the region, November 2025-June 2026 precipitation was only very low (45-83%); it was not record-low in most locations near wildfires. Temperatures were very warm preceding the 2026 fire season. November 2025-July 2026

temperatures were record-hot on a statewide basis in Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming, and average temperatures near the largest ten wildfires were the warmest or second warmest on record. By the end of June, with the combined impacts of warm temperatures, low snowpack and low precipitation, drought conditions prevailed across the entire region with extreme drought in western Colorado, central Utah, and eastern Wyoming (Figure 1). All but three large wildfires burned in areas experiencing at least severe drought, and eight of the nine largest wildfires in 2026 started or burned in areas with extreme drought conditions.

The hydrometeorological conditions of 2026 primed the landscape for amplified wildfire risk, both in terms of the antecedent moisture from severe snow drought⁷ and deficits in moisture that persisted through the summer. In the assessment of the meteorological conditions during 2026 relative to the historical record, 2026 was the lowest mean winter precipitation accumulated from January through March since 1979, and the mean summertime vapor pressure deficit, a measure of atmospheric dryness, was the fourth highest on record (Figure 2⁸). Anomalously dry conditions in 2026 both increased the risk of

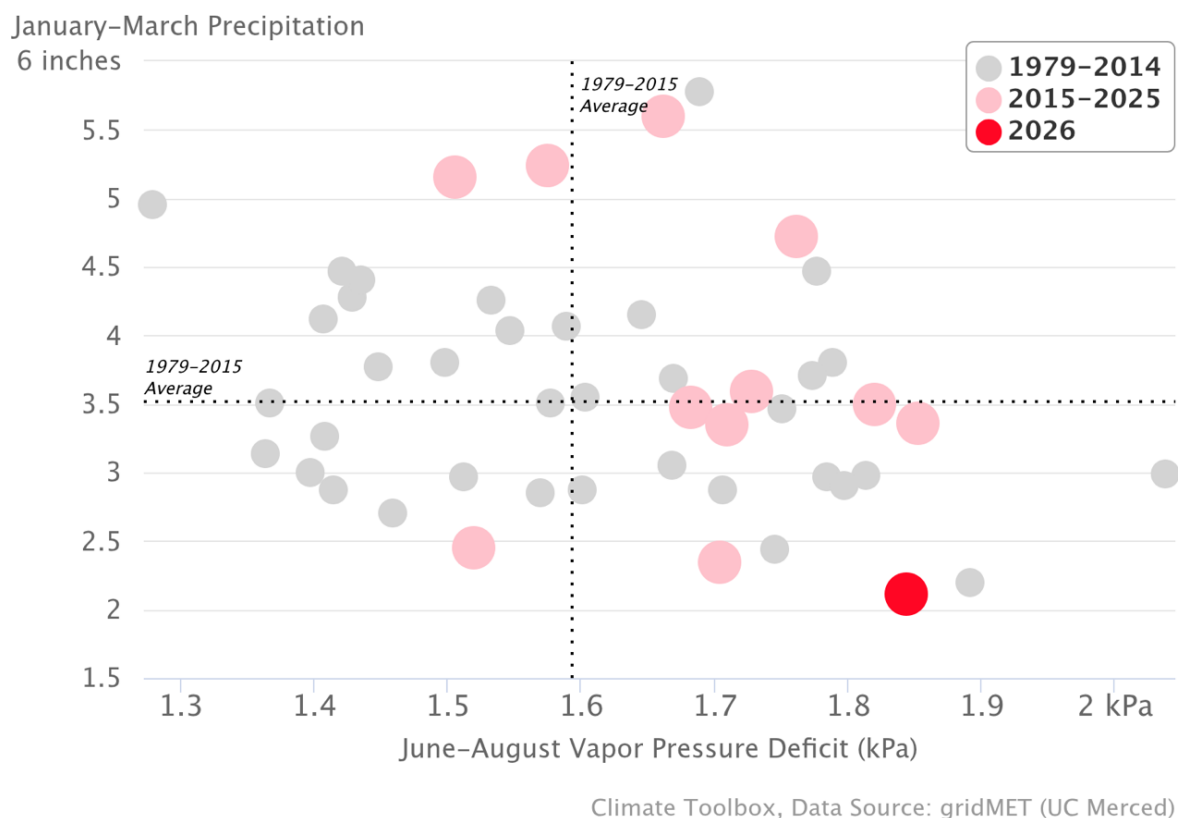


Figure 2. Comparison between 2026 and historical winter precipitation and summer vapor pressure deficit. Each point shows the annual values for wintertime accumulated daily precipitation from January through March (inches; vertical axis) and the mean summertime (June through August) vapor pressure deficit (kPa; horizontal axis) for each year from 1979–2026. Horizontal and vertical dashed lines show the average values of precipitation and vapor pressure deficit from all years from 1979–2015. All values are spatially averaged across the domain of Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah.

wildfire through the desiccation of vegetation fuel loads^{9,10} and coincided with frequent record-breaking temperatures across the region¹¹.

Fire Weather

With the landscape primed for wildfire, late June brought hot and windy weather to the Intermountain West. The National Weather Service (NWS) issued more than 200 red flag warnings across Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah during the summer of 2026¹², associated with the seasonal hot-dry-windy conditions that persisted during the warm season after the record-breaking dry winter that preceded.¹³ From June 19-29, 65 red flag warnings were issued in Colorado and Utah, and nine of the ten largest wildfires started. Among the ten largest wildfires that burned in this region, eight of them were ignited during an active local NWS red flag warning, one ignited within 48 hours of a local red flag warning, and only one (the Widemouth 2 fire in Utah) ignited in the absence of a red flag warning, and outside of the June 19-29 period. When evaluating all wildfires that burned more than 1,000 acres during the 2026 wildfire season (50 in total as of 9/15/26), 52% ignited within 24 hours of the NWS issuing a red flag warning. This coincidence of the largest wildfires with red flag warnings demonstrates the meteorological amplification of wildfire risk in the region that compounded with the drought conditions at the onset of the season that had primed the landscape for wildfire risk.

Wildfire impacts

Wildfires during 2026 in Colorado and Utah led to the loss of life, loss of structures and homes, damage and disruption to transportation infrastructure, elevated air pollution, and economic costs, both known and yet to be determined. While many 2026 wildfires were in remote areas, 27 communities across Colorado, Utah, and

Wyoming were within five miles of a 2026 wildfire perimeter, and 54 communities were within ten miles of a fire perimeter. An estimated 47,000 people live within 5 miles of a 2026 fire perimeter, and 191,000 people live within 10 miles of a wildfire (Table 3).¹⁴ These communities closest to wildfire are disproportionately rural, although Pueblo, CO was within 10-15 miles of two wildfires during 2026. Expanding the scale, 158 communities that are home to an estimated 2.36 million people were within 25 miles of a wildfire perimeter, including parts of the metropolitan areas of Ogden, Provo, and Salt Lake City, UT.¹⁰

Table 3. Population estimates for areas within 5, 10 and 25 miles (mi) of a 2026 wildfire perimeter for CO, UT, WY and the region.¹⁰

	Population near wildfire		
	<5 miles	<10 mi	<25 mi
Colorado	21,000	85,000	692,000
Utah	13,000	69,000	1,559,000
Wyoming	13,000	37,000	106,000
Region	47,000	191,000	2,356,000

Loss of life

Two tragic accidents resulting in the loss of life of wildfire fighting personnel occurred during 2026, one fighting the Snyder Fire along the UT/CO border and the other fighting the Widemouth 2 Fire in Utah. On June 27, the Snyder Fire was exhibiting extreme fire behavior under a red flag warning as a five-person crew became trapped between the Snyder Fire and a new fire started by dry lightning. The crew called for helicopter evacuation, but 20 minutes later when it arrived, the crew was obscured by smoke and deployed their emergency shelters. Three firefighters died during the burn-over event, a fourth later died in the hospital, and the fifth crew member was injured.¹⁵ The second fatal accident occurred on August 7 when a helicopter fighting the Widemouth 2 Fire in Utah crashed while attempting to drop a load of water. The two pilots were killed when the helicopter crashed inside the fire's perimeter. The cause of the crash remains under investigation.¹⁶ Our sincere condolences go out to the families and loved ones of the lost firefighters, and we are grateful for their work keeping our communities safe from fire.

Structural damage

The 102,000-acre Aspen Acres Fire and the 97,000-acre Cottonwood Fire were particularly destructive, burning a combined 1,000 structures. The Aspen Acres Fire burned an estimated 850 structures, including 319 homes,¹⁷ making it the fifth most destructive fire in Colorado history and the eighth largest Colorado wildfire.¹⁸ Beulah suffered the majority of burned residences, but homes also burned in Rye and Colorado City. The Cottonwood Fire in southern Utah burned to the edge of Beaver, UT and burned approximately 150 structures in the Eagle Point community at the base of a local ski area.¹⁹ An estimated 145 condominiums and cabins burned at the base of Eagle Point Ski Area, along with a ski lodge, four ski lifts, and 300 of the resort's 600 skiable acres.²⁰ The Cottonwood Fire was the third most destructive in Utah's history, narrowly behind the 2018 Dollar Ridge Fire (170 structures burned) and 2012 Wood Hollow Fire (160 structures burned). An estimated total of 1,0007 structures burned in Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming during 2026, including 464 homes and five structures in Utah's Babylon Fire and two structures in Wyoming's Weiser Knolls Fire.

Economic cost estimates

The full economic cost of the 2026 wildfire season is yet to be determined, as economic losses from structures burned, infrastructure damage, and lost revenue due to transportation and tourism disruptions remain unknown. The cost of fighting all wildfires during 2026 in Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming was estimated at \$605 million. Most firefighting resources were spent in Colorado (\$328 million) and Utah (\$250 million), and the Aspen Acres Fire was the most expensive at \$104 million.¹ Notably, the Aspen Acres

Fire has one of the highest population estimates within five miles (4,900 people) and by far the highest population within ten miles of the fire (45,000 people).¹⁰ While the economic cost of the wildfire season is not yet established, assessing the scope of evacuations and road closures begins to uncover the level of disruption wildfires can cause. Mandatory evacuations were issued for areas around 18 of the 26 wildfires larger than 5,000 acres in 2026.¹ Mandatory evacuations impacted only a relatively small number of rural residents for many wildfires, but seven fires triggered mandatory evacuations from 14 rural communities, including Eureka, Utah which was evacuated twice in two weeks for the Iron and then the Cherry Fires. Mandatory evacuations were not issued for residents around the Snyder Fire, but 123 boaters on the Colorado River in Ruby-Horsethief Canyon along the CO/UT border were evacuated via helicopter; it was the largest-ever mass evacuation by Mesa County (Colorado) Search and Rescue.²¹ Major roads (state and federal highways) were temporarily closed near 10 of the 26 wildfires larger than 5,000 acres and local roads were closed around 21 of 26 fires.²²

Regional Air Quality Impacts

As of mid-September 2026, there were two periods of extended unhealthy air quality across Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming that were driven by smoke from wildfires burning both locally and across the western U.S. The period of extensive fire ignition and spread that occurred in late June through early July caused widespread reductions in air quality for nearly all counties in Utah and Colorado (Figure 3)³⁹. During this period, Wyoming experienced less of

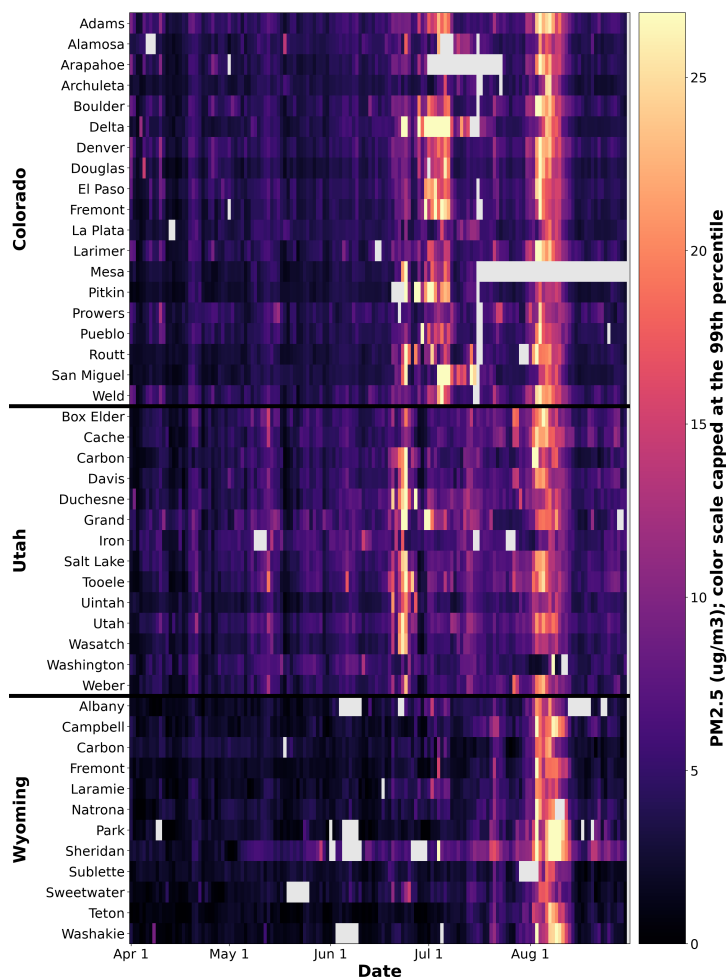


Figure 3. Heatmap of daily, county-level air quality impacts associated with wildfire smoke for 2026.

Daily observations of PM2.5 for each day from April 1st through August 30th from counties where station observations are published in the EPA AirNow air quality reporting system. For each county/day, all station observations are averaged to generate a single value of daily PM2.5 for each county (hued by the color bar shown). Gray shaded rectangles indicate where no observations are published for a county for that day and counties with <50% of observations for the days between April-August are not shown.³⁹

the widespread smoke-related air quality impacts due to prevailing winds carrying most of the smoke generated in Utah and western Colorado to the east, south of Wyoming. For counties across all three states, late July and early August experienced significant widespread air quality disturbances associated with wildfire smoke in Utah’s Widemouth 2 Fire and regional wildfires across the Pacific Northwest³⁹ (nine large wildfires ignited between July 15 – 26 and burned more than 2.4 million acres⁷⁰).

During 2026, air quality index (AQI) was significantly impacted by wildfire smoke across the three states. To estimate the impact of wildfire smoke on human health, the authors of this report utilize county population data, EPA AQI classification, and county level AirNow PM2.5 (atmospheric particulate concentrations directly impacted by wildfire smoke) observations to calculate the number of person-days of poor air quality (days of poor air quality x population affected) that the people living in Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah experienced (Table 4). Moderate AQI conditions, which impact groups with significant respiratory sensitivities,²³ totaled more than 280 million person-days, primarily occurring in Colorado and Utah. More severe AQI conditions (“Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups” and “Unhealthy”), which have negative respiratory effects on a much larger subset of the population, totaled 1.4 million person-days across the region. Air quality, evaluated using AQI conditions, can be impacted by both wildfire smoke and local dust or urban emissions; large regional patterns in poor summer air quality largely attributed to wildfire smoke. While direct wildfire burning had acute infrastructure, ecologic, economic, and safety impacts locally near large fires, the air quality disturbances associated with regional wildfires had potentially negative health impacts for the population across all three states.

Table 4. Estimated population-weighted person-days associated with elevated daily PM2.5 concentrations from April 1 through August 30, 2026. For each county and day with available monitoring observations, the highest reported 24-hour mean PM2.5 concentration was classified according to the U.S. EPA PM2.5-specific Air Quality Index categories³⁹. For each day of observed PM2.5 estimated AQI within a county of Moderate or worse, the county's 2025 Census population estimate was assigned to that AQI category and summed across counties and days. For example, a county with 100,000 residents experiencing three Moderate PM2.5 days contributes 300,000 Moderate person-days.

State	Moderate	Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups	Unhealthy
Colorado	129,349,000	744,000	483,000
Utah	145,348,000	61,000	20,000
Wyoming	5,911,000	120,000	39,000
3-state total	280,608,000	925,000	542,000

Post-wildfire flooding

Many 2026 fires burned very intensely, especially those that burned in forests, resulting in a high burn severity across 53% of forests burned in Colorado (100,000 acres) and 57% of forests burned in Utah (195,000 acres).¹ A high burn severity means that most vegetation and organic components in the soil have burned, leaving mineral soils exposed and susceptible to debris flows during high rainfall intensity. The intense heat from the wildfires also alters the permeability of the soil, making the ground less able to absorb runoff. Post-wildfire flooding is an example of a compound hazard, where one natural hazard (e.g., wildfire) can cause a cascade of other hazards (e.g., flash flooding and debris flows)²⁴. Flash flood events on burn scars are capable of causing substantial damage to human infrastructure and can significantly impact communities. In summer 2026, several major wildfire burn scars across Colorado and Utah experienced significant post-fire flooding as monsoonal thunderstorms produced intense rainfall over recently burned landscapes. Flash flood warnings were issued by the National Weather Service for areas burned by 16 fires, with the most flash flood warnings occurring for the Cottonwood (13), Lee (12), Babylon (9), Ferris (9), and Aspen Acres (6) Fire burn scars.²⁵ While there were many flash flooding events this summer in Colorado and Utah, the Aspen Acres, Gold Mountain, Cottonwood, and New Castle Fire burn scars experienced flooding events that were among the most notable during 2026.

Cottonwood burn scar flooding

The most damaging post-wildfire flooding of the summer in Utah occurred within the Cottonwood Fire burn scar in Beaver County. Nearly the entire Beaver River headwaters in the Tushar Mountains burned, which created a very high risk of debris flow flash flooding for the Beaver River. Many flash flood events occurred on this burn scar from mid-July to mid-August, but the most significant event occurred on July 19, when 0.5-1.5 inches of rain fell in the Beaver River headwaters, causing significant flash flooding and debris flows. The National Weather Service (NWS) issued a Flash Flood Emergency for the Cottonwood burn scar, including areas along the Beaver River and North Creek, prompting immediate evacuations. A large debris flow overtopped the diversion dam in Beaver Canyon, causing more debris flows to move downstream into the Grove area of Beaver.^{26,27} Homes, infrastructure, and roads in Beaver were damaged by floodwaters and debris flows. The flooding damaged approximately 200 homes, and one neighborhood remained evacuated for an additional day following the flood.²⁸ Parts of Route 153 were washed out and are closed indefinitely for repair, and Interstate 15 was closed for a day.²⁹ The water supply for Beaver was compromised by the floodwaters, and residents were under a boil-water notice for about 12 days.³⁰

Aspen Acres burn scar flooding

Colorado's most damaging post-wildfire flooding occurred within the Aspen Acres Fire burn scar in Pueblo and Custer Counties. On July 28-29, severe thunderstorms brought intense rainfall and caused flooding and debris flows in Beulah, CO. Residents of Beulah were evacuated as rainfall rates reached 1-3 inches/hour (1.04 inches in Beulah³). The floodwaters, carrying rocks, burned trees, and propane tanks, damaged homes, washed out roads, and blocked bridges with debris. Highways 78 and 165, and other critical roads were closed, limiting access for Beulah Valley. Between Beulah, San Isabel, and Wetmore, at least 11 homes were damaged by flooding, and many roads and culverts required emergency repair.^{31,32} On August 16, 1-1.5 inches of rain fell at a rate of 1.5 inches/hour, triggering another major flash flood resulting in the death of an 80-year-old Beulah resident who was swept downstream in floodwaters.³³ On August 23, Colorado Governor Jared Polis officially requested a Major Disaster Declaration from the President and the Federal Emergency Management Agency to support recovery from the Aspen Acres and Gold Mountain Fires, and post-wildfire flooding from both fires.³⁴



Figure 4. Damage from debris flow flash flooding in Beulah, CO on Jul 29, 2026. Photo credit: Pueblo County Sheriff's Office.

Gold Mountain burn scar flooding

On July 29, the same day as flash flooding on the Aspen Acres burn scar, monsoonal thunderstorms brought heavy rainfall to the Gold Mountain Fire burn scar in southwestern Colorado, prompting emergency evacuations between Ouray and Ridgway. North of Ouray, 17 people were rescued from flooding and debris flows near Cutler Creek, and three homes in Ponderosa Village were destroyed. Flash floods caused eight mudslides on U.S. 550, closing Red Mountain Pass between Silverton and Ouray in both directions. Another 4-mile stretch of the highway was closed north of Ouray due to the

floodwaters. These closures limited access and disrupted the tourism economy for Western Slope communities.³⁵

New Castle burn scar flooding

On July 20, monsoonal rainfall and hail triggered a mudslide and debris flow over Interstate 70 between New Castle and Silt, Colorado, causing the highway to close in both directions. This debris flow was made worse by a 21-year-old burn scar near New Castle.³⁶ By the next day, the flooded portion of the highway was still under about a foot and a half of water. The Colorado Department of Transportation estimated that the mud and debris covered more than 300 yards of the highway west of New Castle.³⁷ This caused significant transportation disruptions and an estimated \$100 million loss in economic activity, as eastbound I-70 only partially opened after two days, and westbound I-70 remained closed for three days as crews worked on removing debris and draining the floodwater.^{20, 38} The flash flooding on July 20 also caused damage to many homes and yards off Peach Valley Road west of New Castle along I-70.²¹

Acknowledgments

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