

**MEMORANDUM**

To: Bill Schenk, Adam Strainer

C: Brad Schmitz, Ken McDonald, Renee Lemon, Amy Groen, Stephen Begley

From: Andy Brummond, FWP Water Program
Mike Backes, Region 7 Fisheries Manager

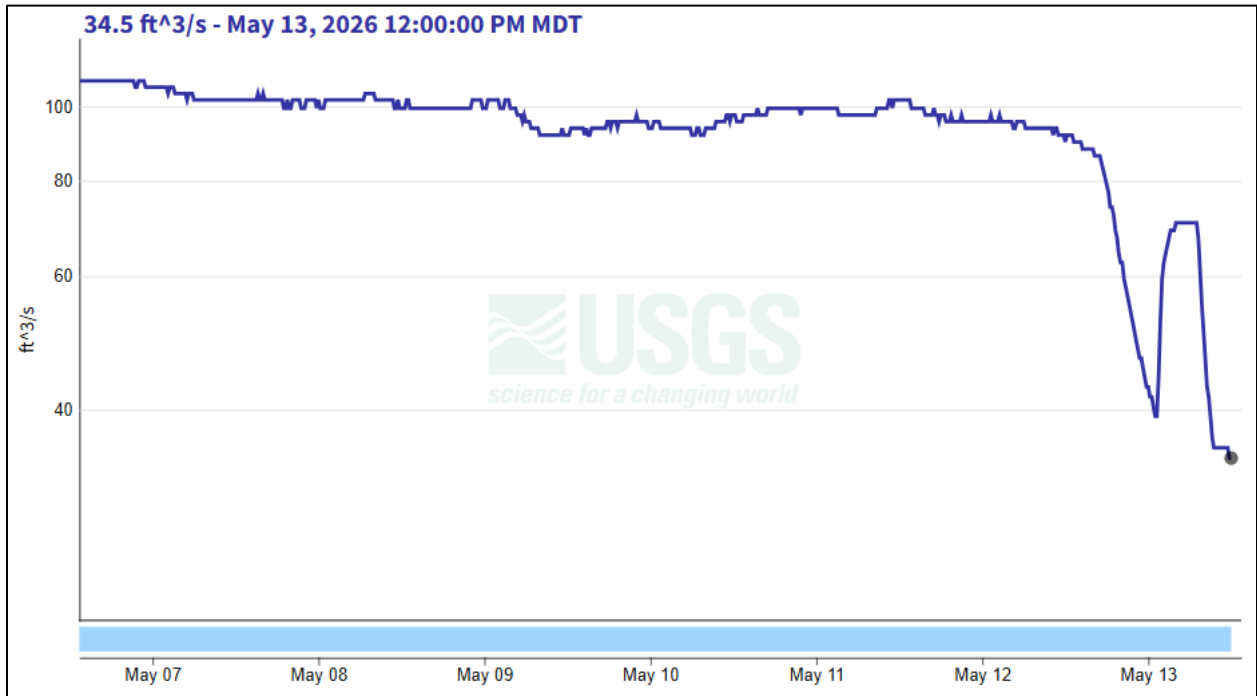
Date: May 13, 2026

Subject: Tongue River Basin below Tongue River Reservoir – Call on Junior Water Rights

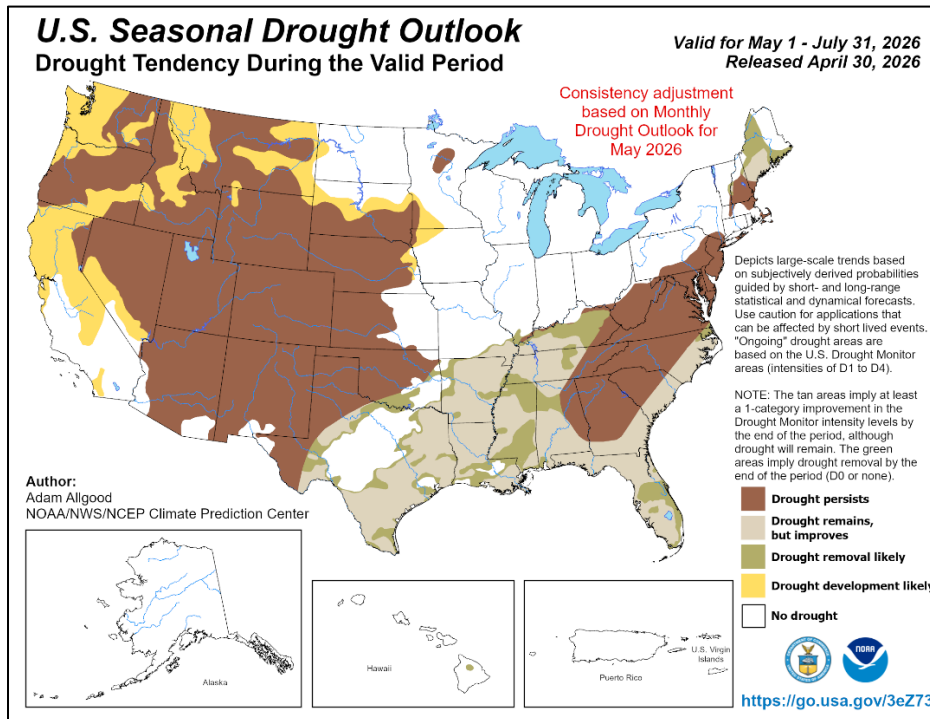
The T&Y Irrigation District will turn on their canal located at 12 Mile Dam FAS today (May 13th). Their water right is 187 cubic feet per second (CFS) and the river at Miles City with only 94 CFS flowing at Miles City as of this morning. Thus, the 21 river miles between 12 Mile Dam and Yellowstone River may become nearly dewatered. Releases from Tongue River Reservoir were increased early today to 185 CFS to assist with delivering water to T&Y Canal but that usually take 3-5 days for the water to travel that distance. This shortage of water and a dismal river at Miles City below the T&Y will likely be a reality throughout the irrigation season. Unfortunately, history in the Tongue River in similar drought years demonstrates that water released from Tongue River Reservoir to supply T&Y Canal is frequently consumed by other irrigators, so frequent complaints about a low river and fighting between upstream and downstream irrigators are likely.

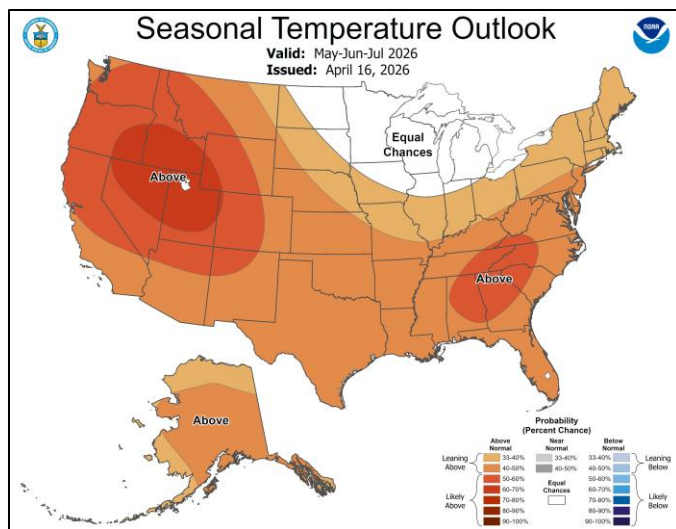
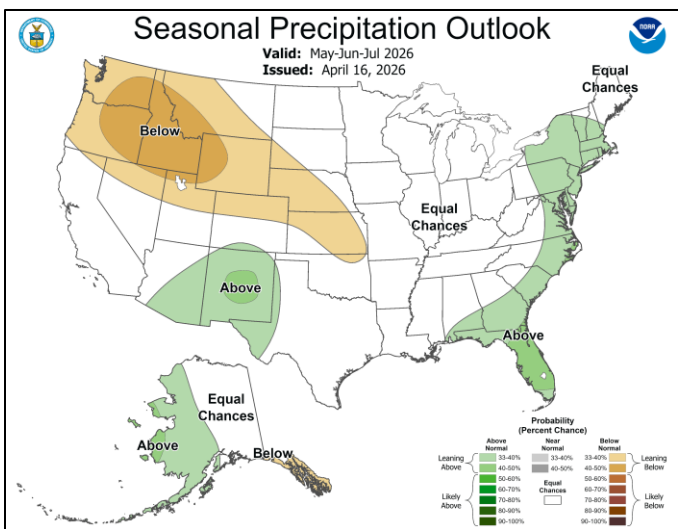
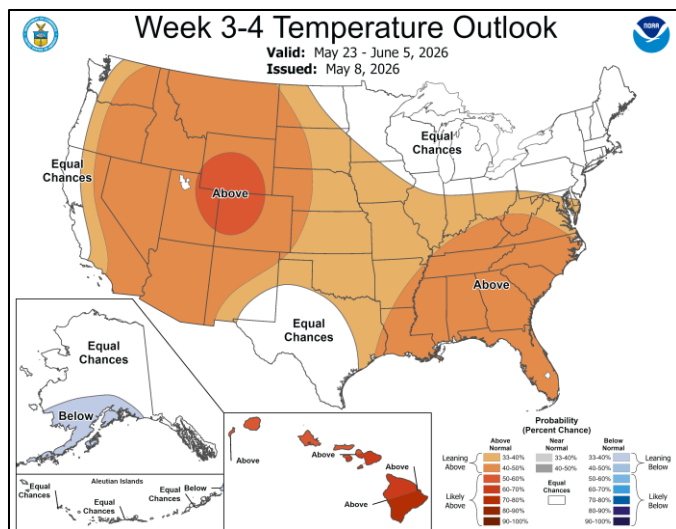
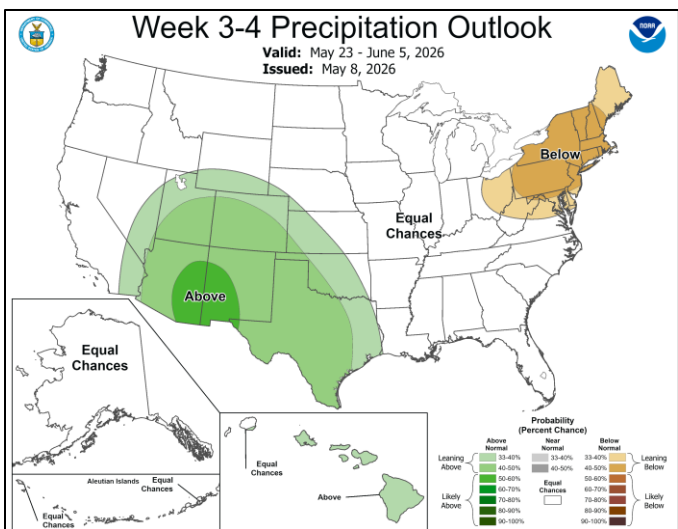
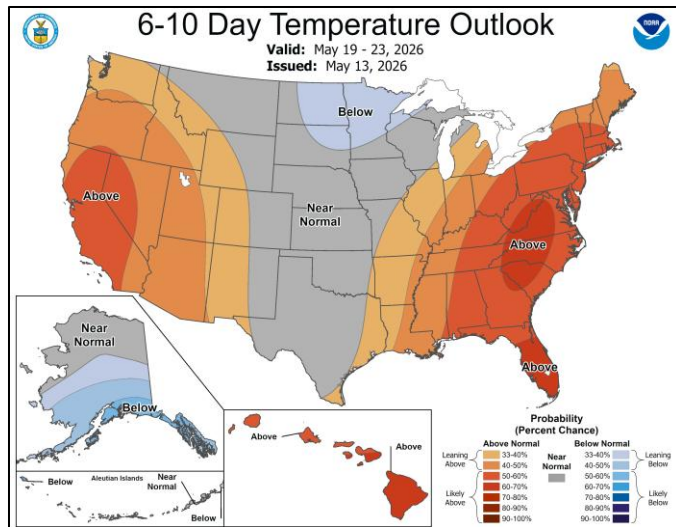
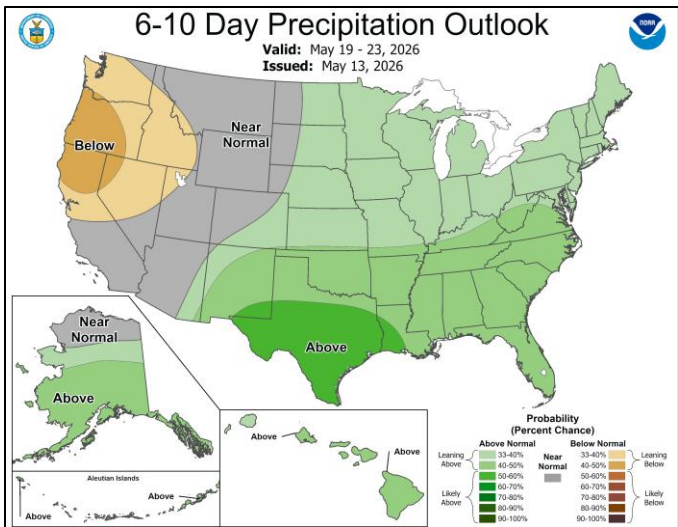
The State of Montana has made call on Wyoming on water rights junior in priority to that of Tongue River Reservoir. DNRC has also made call on water rights in Montana junior in priority to Tongue River Reservoir upstream of the dam.

Fisheries and Water Program staff are monitoring flow in the Tongue River at its in mouth and have consulted on river conditions and potential merits of placing call on junior water uses. We jointly recommend that FWP make call on the Tongue River basin below Tongue River Reservoir. The hydrograph below shows that flow in the Tongue River by the afternoon has dropped well below FWP's 75 cfs Water Reservation showing the impact of the T&Y Canal turning on.



The Seasonal Drought Outlook below shows drought in the Tongue River basin persisting or developing through the summer. The 6-10-day outlooks on the following page indicate near normal conditions in the short term but this will not likely offset the significant flow deficits currently being experienced. The 3-4 week outlooks indicate above normal temperatures keeping irrigation demand high. The Seasonal (May -Jul) precipitation is expected to be below normal with above normal temperatures. Even with near normal near-term weather conditions anticipated, the high demand for irrigation water coupled with the ongoing hydrologic deficit streamflow is not expected to again regularly meet FWP’s instream flow rights into the fall without significant precipitation events.





DNRC’s water rights database includes 28 junior water rights in the Tongue River basin below Tongue River Reservoir. Eight junior water rights upstream of the Tongue River Reservoir Dam were included in this tally as DNRC has already called this portion of the basin based on its more senior water right for the reservoir. Each water right was reviewed to determine if cessation of diversion would likely result in additional flow reaching the Tongue River. The following table lists the water rights by general purpose category.

Purpose	Call	No Call	Total Called Flow Rate
Fish, Wildlife, Recreation Ponds	3	2	6.68 cfs
Irrigation	12	6	20.17 cfs
Stock	0	7	-
Total	15	15	26.85 cfs

The Tongue River and its tributaries are home to warmwater fish species including many native species. Since 1999, large collaborative efforts have improved fish passage conditions at the major irrigation diversion dams on the Tongue River. The combination of these efforts provides upstream passage for an additional 165 river miles of the Tongue River for many native fish species from the Yellowstone River. Preserving water connectivity within the lower Tongue River, even if only minimal, is critical to the existing fish populations by maintaining suitable water quality, physical habitat and allowing some movement through the river.

For the reasons stated above, Fisheries and Water Program staff jointly recommend that FWP make call on certain junior water rights in the Tongue River Basin below Tongue River Reservoir.