

Projected climate change scenarios for Wrangell-Saint Elias National Park & Preserve



Average Annual Temperature (°F)

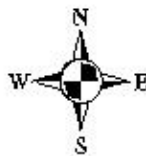


1961-1990

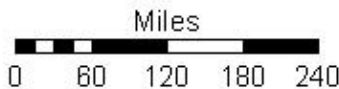
PRISM 30-year historical average



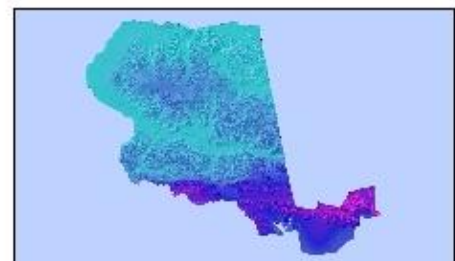
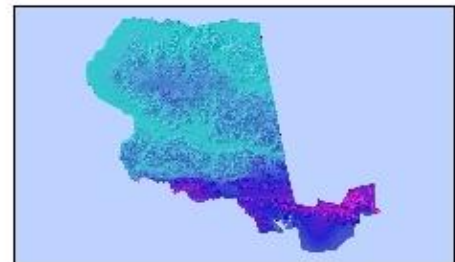
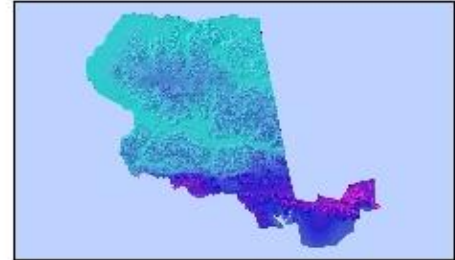
2035-2044



2075-2084



Total Annual Precipitation (inches)



Magnitude of climatic change

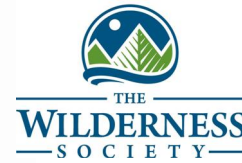
Projected Temperature (TEMP) Change (°F)				Projected Precipitation (PRCP) Change (in.)				
Season	Time	Avg. TEMP	Δ TEMP*	Season	Time	Total PRCP	Δ PRCP*	% Δ PRCP*
Annual	Hist.	23.6 ± 2.0	NA	Annual	Hist.	85.2 ± 25.8	NA	NA
	2040	27.5 ± 2.0	3.8		2040	90.5 ± 26.0	5.3	6%
	2080	30.7 ± 1.9	7.1		2080	93.6 ± 26.0	8.4	10%
Summer	Hist.	41.6 ± 2.4	NA	Summer	Hist.	36.2 ± 8.9	NA	NA
	2040	44.1 ± 2.5	2.5		2040	38.7 ± 9.0	2.5	7%
	2080	47.2 ± 2.4	5.5		2080	39.6 ± 9.0	3.4	9%
Winter	Hist.	10.8 ± 1.9	NA	Winter	Hist.	48.9 ± 17.1	NA	NA
	2040	15.6 ± 1.9	4.8		2040	51.8 ± 17.2	2.9	6%
	2080	18.9 ± 1.9	8.2		2080	54.0 ± 17.3	5.1	10%

* Δ PRCP/TEMP: change in decadal precipitation/temperature average from historic value

For more information:

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Climate Change Implications for Wrangell-Saint Elias National Park & Preserve



Climate Change in Alaska

Many areas in Alaska are already showing signs of climate change. Scientists have reported observations of wetland drying, glacial and polar sea ice recession, spruce-bark beetle infestations, and an increase in fire frequency and intensity throughout the state. A better understanding of where and when such changes could continue to occur is needed to help decision makers identify how Alaska's ecosystems may respond in the future.

In order to understand what these changes may be like, data from a composite of five down-scaled global circulation models was used to estimate decadal averages of future temperature and precipitation values within the preserve. These models assume a steady increase in carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from fossil fuel combustion over the first several decades of the 21st century, followed by a gradual decline in emissions as several kinds of low-emission energy alternatives become more prevalent. This emissions regime is considered a "moderate" estimate¹. Several other scenarios have predicted higher emission rates, and scientists have since determined current levels² are significantly greater than even the most extreme concentrations analyzed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Higher emissions rates will likely accelerate changes in climate and lead to more severe ecosystem impacts.

Temperature changes in Wrangell-Saint Elias National Park & Preserve

Temperatures are projected to increase over the coming decades at an average rate of about 1°F per decade. Average annual temperature is expected to rise by about 4°F by 2040 and as much as 7°F by 2080.

Considering the natural variation in temperatures across the study area, this is likely to result in a transition from average annual temperatures well below the freezing point (~24°F), to temperatures approaching the freezing point (~31°F).

A likely outcome of these changes is a lengthening of the growing season, a change that could have profound effects on wildlife mating cycles, plant growth and flowering, water availability in soil and rivers, and hunting and fishing.

Winter temperatures are projected to change the most dramatically. Mean winter temperatures could reach a high of 19°F by 2080, a figure that represents an impressive 8°F rise from the historical 11°F average. Average summer temperatures are projected to rise by slightly more than 5°F by 2080 (from ~42°F to ~47°F). Some species may benefit from these changes, while others may not be able to adapt or find suitable habitat conditions to sustain their populations.

Precipitation changes in Wrangell-Saint Elias National Park & Preserve

Precipitation is predicted to increase across the study area. Despite this area-wide increase, conditions are expected to become substantially drier in the summer and fall and potentially icier in winter. Although summer rainfall is expected to rise by 9%, this increase is unlikely to be enough to offset an increase in evapotranspiration caused by warmer temperatures and a longer growing season. Winter precipitation may also increase by as much as 10% and could fall in the form of snow, ice, or rain, depending on the temperature. Ultimately, the timing and intensity of precipitation will determine how these changes affect the landscape and hydrology of the Preserve.

Summary of findings

Wrangell-Saint Elias National Park & Preserve is projected to become warmer and drier over the next century. Warmer temperatures and a longer growing season are expected to increase evapotranspiration enough to outweigh a regional increase in precipitation. Seasonal changes in climate will have profound impacts on the condition and health of wildlife habitat, lead to increased fire risk, and contribute to the likelihood of wetlands, streams, and lakes drying.

It is important to note that predicting changes in environmental variables is difficult, especially in Alaska where historical climate monitoring data is sparse. Increasing the scope of precipitation, temperature, and ecological monitoring throughout Alaska is one of the best strategies for improving our understanding of changes in climate and the response of ecosystems.

¹ This emissions outlook is the "A1B" scenario from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fourth Assessment, published in 2007. The models used in this analysis included Ecam5, Gfdl2.1, Miroc3.2MR, HadCM3, and CGCM3.1.

² Recent rates of global CO₂ emissions can be found on the Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Center website (www.cdiac.esd.ornl.gov).