

Snow Cover

Canadian Environmental
Sustainability Indicators



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Canadian Environmental Sustainability Indicators

Snow cover

March 2026

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Snow cover

Terrestrial snow is an important component of Canada’s climate, water resources, and ecosystems. The quantity, coverage, and duration of terrestrial snow vary with temperature, precipitation and climate cycles (for example, El Niño), which influence long term trends. Information on all 3 aspects of terrestrial snow is important for assessing long-term changes in climate in Canada.

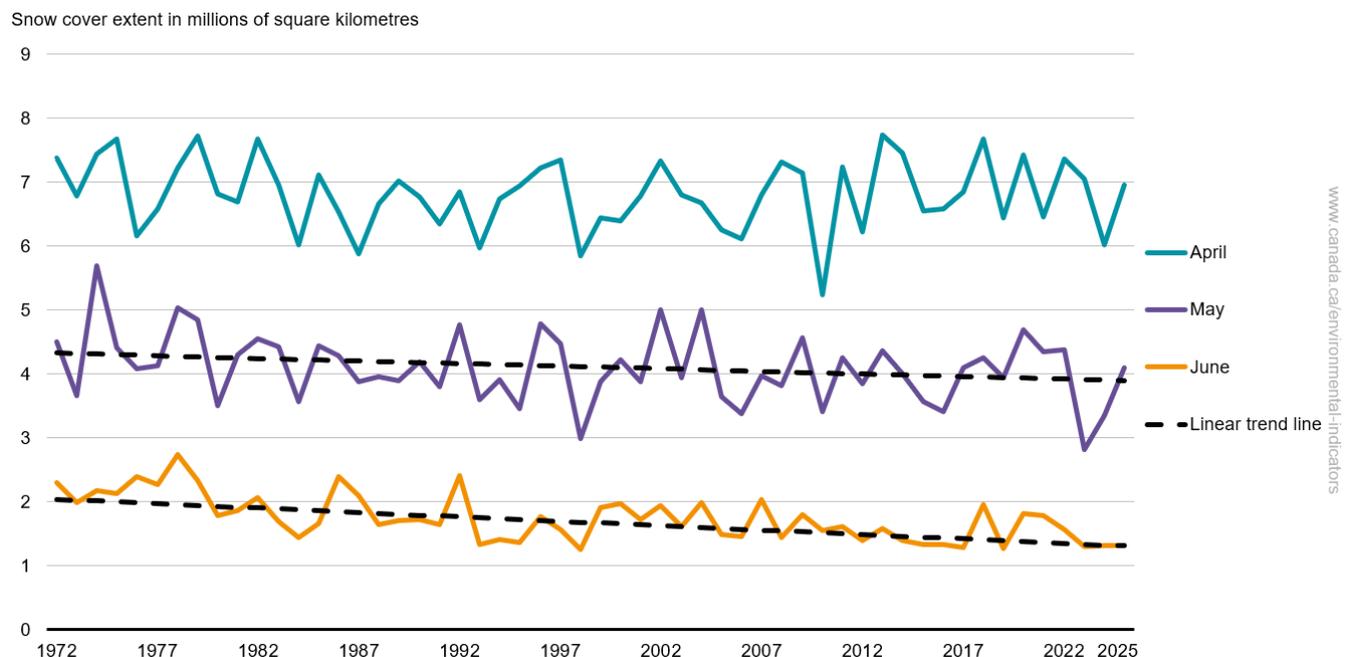
Snow cover extent

Snow cover extent is the area of land covered by snow. Snow cover extent is closely linked to air temperature. As a result, it follows a regular seasonal cycle but also varies from year to year. These year-to-year variations can be tracked by looking at snow cover at the same time each year over many years in a row. The influence of climate change can be seen over this period as a long-term decrease in snow cover extent, shown by an overall downward trend. Spring snow cover trends are of particular interest because changes in the timing of snow melt have a wide range of impacts (for example, hydrology, ecosystems and wildfire risk) and because decreases in snow cover result in a positive albedo feedback in the climate system.

Key results

- Since the early 1970s, snow cover extent has decreased significantly in Canada during the months of May and June

Figure 1. Snow cover extent in spring (April, May and June), Canada, 1972 to 2025



[Data for Figure 1](#)

Note: The dashed line indicates a statistically significant trend based on the Mann-Kendall and Sen methods at the 95% confidence level. Note that the trend over time for the month of April is not statistically significant.

Source: Environment and Climate Change Canada (2026) Climate Research Division, Climate Processes Section.

While no statistical trend was detected for Canadian snow cover extent in April over the 1972 to 2025 period, decreasing trends of 1.9% and 6.8% per decade were detected in May and June, respectively.

The reductions in snow cover extent across Canada during May and June are consistent with similar reductions across the entire Arctic.¹ These reductions in snow cover extent throughout the Arctic in May and June have been attributed to human-caused climate change.² While there are no similar studies of snow cover extent just in Canada, human-caused climate change is certain to be contributing to the decreases in spring snow cover extent in Canada.

Through the process of surface albedo feedback, the reductions in spring snow cover extent also contribute to Arctic amplification, the tendency for the Arctic to warm faster than lower latitudes.

Snow cover duration

The duration of snow cover influences climate through the insulating and reflecting properties of snow. Snow cover duration varies according to the timing of snow onset in the fall/winter, the timing of melt in the spring, as well as any thaw periods in between. The indicator presents the snow cover duration departures for the 2025 snow year³ and long-term trends in snow cover duration over the period from 1981 to 2025. Departures correspond to the difference between the number of days with snow on the ground for a given year and the average duration over a reference period (1991 to 2020), showing whether snow cover duration was shorter or longer than normal.

Snow cover duration departures

Key results

Snow cover duration departures vary across Canada. For the 2025 snow year:

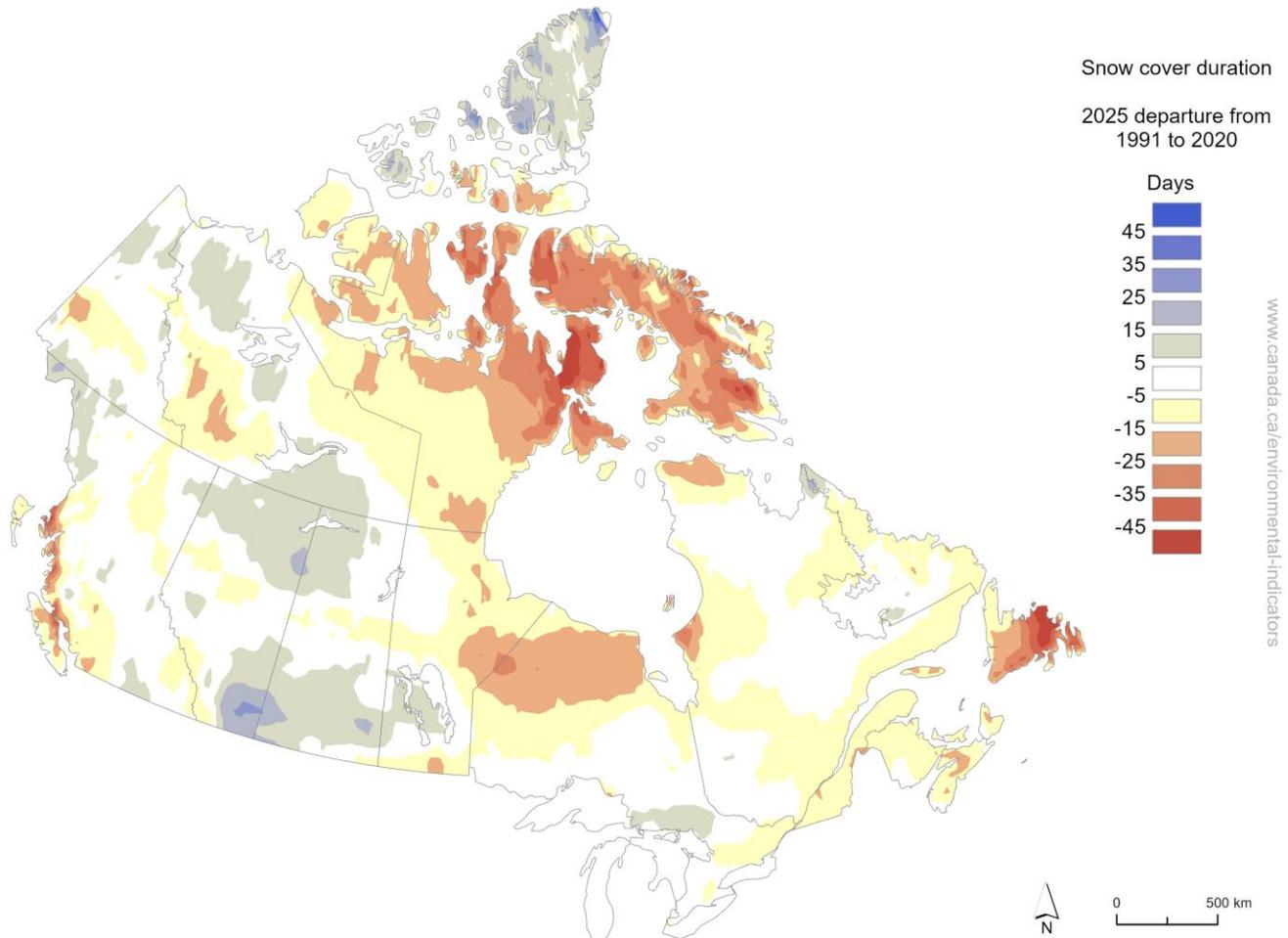
- Above-average snow cover durations occurred in the northernmost part of the Canadian Arctic, Lake Athabasca region in northern Alberta and Saskatchewan reaching to southern Northwest Territories, and southern parts of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba.
- Below-average durations were observed in the majority of Nunavut and the Maritimes. Below-average durations were also observed in eastern and northern Québec, northern Ontario and Manitoba, as well as southwestern Canada including the western coast and Vancouver Island.

¹ Mudryk L et al. (2025) [Terrestrial Snow Cover](#). Arctic Report Card: Update for 2025.

² Paik S and Min S (2020) Quantifying the Anthropogenic Greenhouse Gas Contribution to the Observed Spring Snow-Cover Decline Using the CMIP6 Multimodel Ensemble.

³ A “snow year” is defined differently from a standard calendar year, spanning the period from August 1 to July 31. Snow years are designated by the calendar year in which they end. For example, the 2025 snow year refers to the period from August 1, 2024 to July 31, 2025.

Figure 2. Snow cover duration departures relative to the 1991 to 2020 reference period, Canada, 2025



Note: The 2025 snow year is the period beginning on August 1, 2024, and ending on July 31, 2025. Departures are obtained by subtracting the 1991 to 2020 average value from the number of days with snow on the ground during the 2025 snow year. Warm colours (yellow to red) indicate shorter-than-normal snow cover duration; cool colours (blue) indicate longer-than-normal duration.
Source: Environment and Climate Change Canada (2026) Climate Research Division, Climate Processes Section.

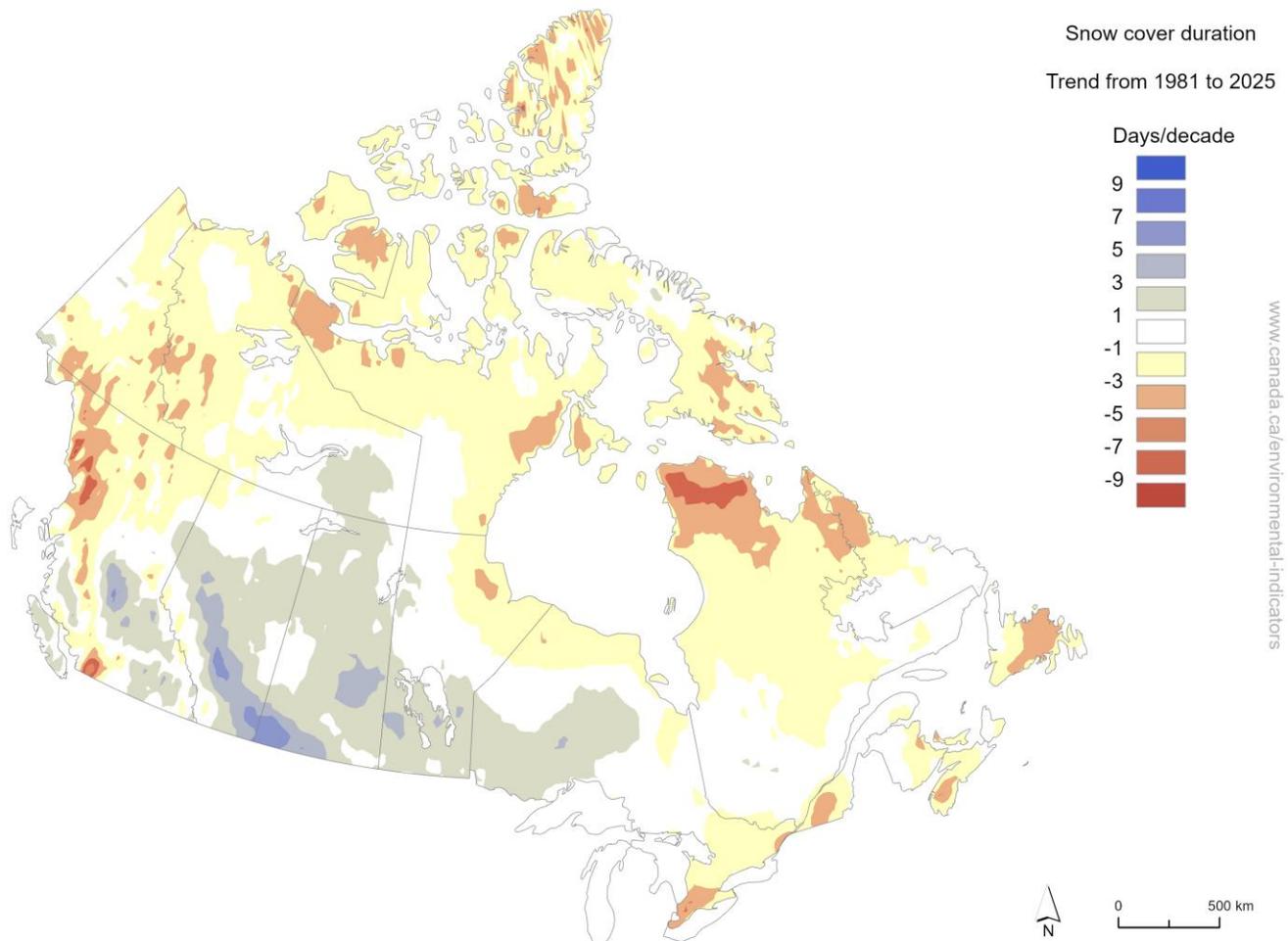
Snow cover duration trend

Key results

Over the analyzed period from 1981 to 2025,

- the number of days with snow cover have decreased along the Pacific coast of Canada, and through most of the Canadian Arctic, southern Ontario, northern Quebec and the Maritimes
- the number of days with snow cover have increased in parts of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, northern Ontario and eastern British Columbia

Figure 3. Snow cover duration trend, Canada, 1981 to 2025



Note: The pattern of trends in snow cover duration reflects a combination of climate change and natural variability. Warm colours (yellow to red) indicate a trend toward shorter snow cover duration; cool colours (blue) indicate a trend toward longer duration.
Source: Environment and Climate Change Canada (2026) Climate Research Division, Climate Processes Section.

Snow cover duration is variable from year to year, with long term trends resulting from a combination of climate warming and natural variability (for example, year-to-year differences in regional weather patterns). Currently, there is insufficient information to establish where trends represent a climate response and where they predominately reflect natural variability.

Snow water equivalent

Water from melted snow is an important resource across Canada. Snow water equivalent is a way to measure the amount of water contained in snowpack. Regions of Canada that remain below freezing in the winter season tend to accumulate snow throughout the season. This snow accumulation means that snow water equivalent increases until reaching a seasonal peak value, just before spring temperatures warm enough to begin melting the snow. While the seasonal timing of when this peak occurs varies across the country, March is a reasonable estimate for much of Canada. Changes in peak snow water equivalent can affect water availability, which impacts factors like drinking water and flooding.

The indicators below express snow water equivalent departures in March 2025 relative to the 1991 to 2020 reference period and the long-term trend in March snow water equivalent over the period from 1981 to 2025. Because the density of snow can vary from location to location and over the course of a season, it is not always easy to determine how much water will result from a layer of snow of a particular depth. Snow water equivalent accounts for both the height/depth of the snowpack as well as its density.

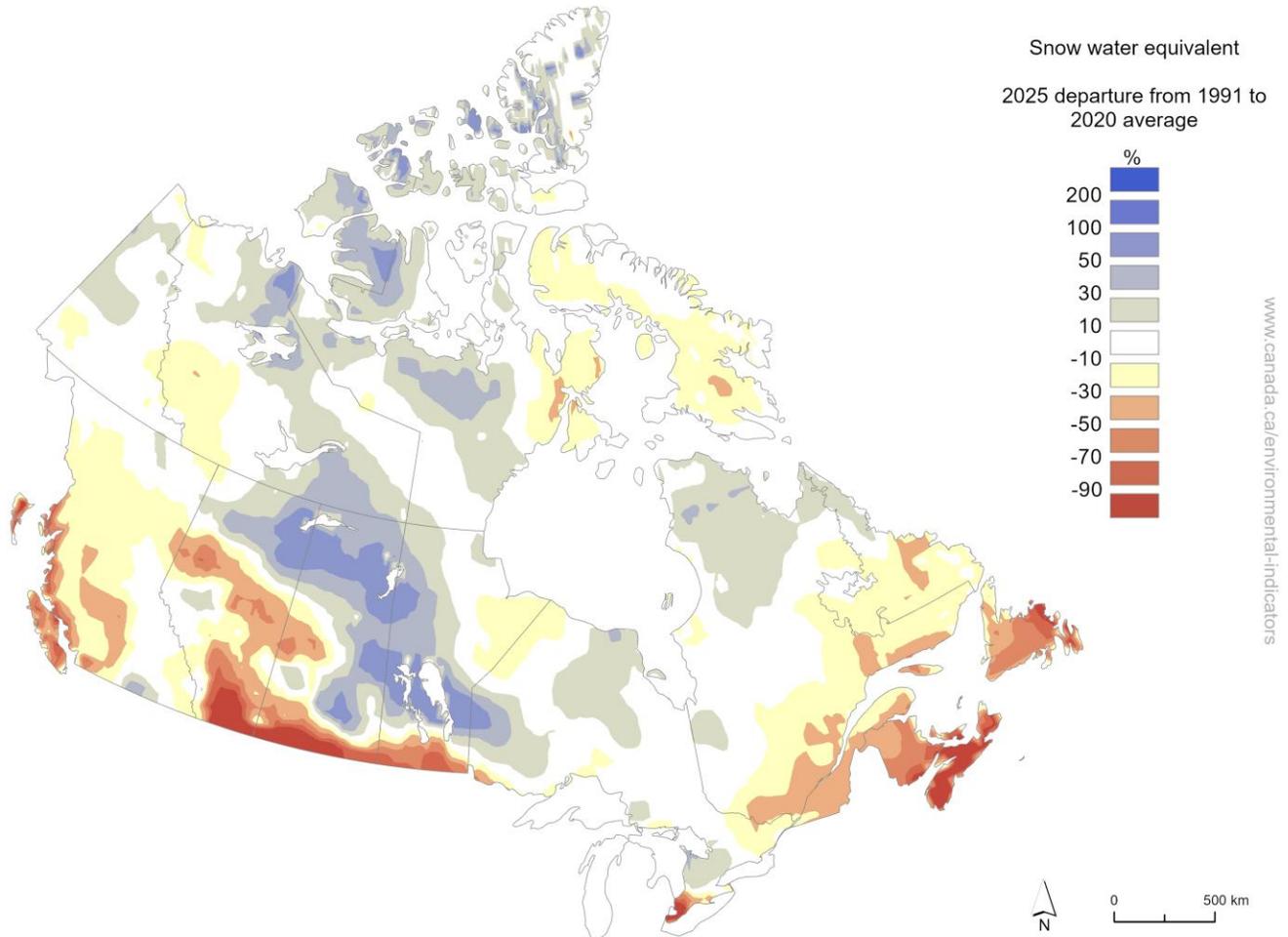
March snow water equivalent

Key results

For the 2025 snow year compared to the 1991 to 2020 reference period,

- the snow water equivalent was above average in most parts of Saskatchewan and Manitoba, northern Alberta, and much of the Northwest Territories and Nunavut
- the snow water equivalent was below average along the southern part of the Pacific coast, in Nunavut around the Northwestern passages, much of southern Canada, and the Maritimes

Figure 4. March snow water equivalent departures relative to 1991 to 2020 reference period, Canada, 2025



Note: The indicator considers the snow water equivalent value for the month of March. Departures are obtained by subtracting the 1981 to 2020 average from the 2025 value. Warm colours (yellow to red) indicate less-than-normal snow water equivalent; cool colours (blue) indicate more-than-normal snow water equivalent.

Source: Environment and Climate Change Canada (2026) Climate Research Division, Climate Processes Section.

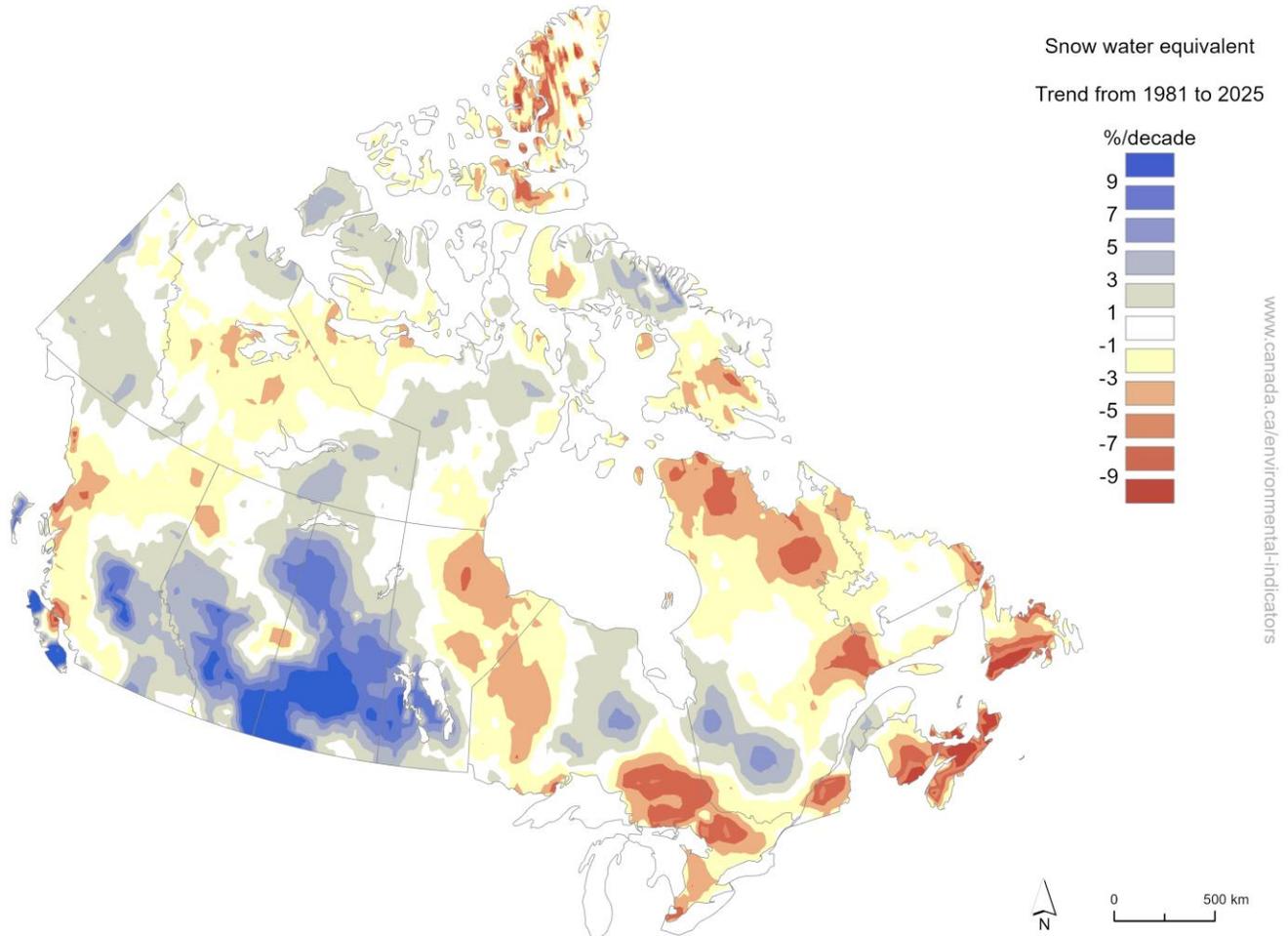
Snow water equivalent trend

Key results

From 1981 to 2025,

- snow water equivalent has increased in parts of central British Columbia and the Prairies
- snow water equivalent has decreased in parts of northern Canada, the Maritimes, and around the Great Lakes

Figure 5. March snow water equivalent trend, Canada, 1981 to 2025



Note: The pattern of snow water equivalent trends reflects a combination of climate change and natural variability. Warm colours (yellow to red) indicate trends towards less snow water equivalent; cool colours (blue) indicate trends towards more snow water equivalent.

Source: Environment and Climate Change Canada (2026) Climate Research Division, Climate Processes Section.

Snow water equivalent is variable from year to year, with long-term trends resulting from a combination of climate warming and natural variability (for example, year-to-year differences in regional weather patterns). Currently there is insufficient information to establish where trends represent a climate response and where they predominately reflect natural variability.

About the indicators

What the indicators measure

The indicators illustrate elements of terrestrial snow over Canada and how they are changing over time. The indicators reported include spring snow cover extent, annual snow cover duration and March snow water equivalent.

Snow cover extent is expressed in millions of square kilometres and is presented for the spring months of April, May and June. Maps are presented for snow cover duration and March snow water equivalent depicting departures in 2025 and long-term trends from 1981 to 2025.

Why these indicators are important

Canada is a snowy country. Sixty-five (65) percent of Canada's land mass has annual snow cover for more than 6 months of the year. Changes in the number of days with snow cover can affect both ecosystems and human systems. For example, changes snow cover duration can affect habitat availability, migration timing in bird species, and the length of the growing season for both native plants and farmed agricultural crops. The melting of ice and snow stored in mountain snowpacks is critical for a multitude of sectors including aquatic ecosystems, agriculture, hydro-electric power generation, and recreational activities.

Changing snow cover duration, extent, and snow water equivalent have a disproportionate effect on Northern communities, including Inuit, Métis, and Indigenous peoples. Snow and ice are critically important in the traditional ways of life for many of these communities: connection to place and land, transmission of traditional knowledge and land skills, access to food and water, and mental health aspects are all impacted by climate change.

Because of its white colour, snow reflects a high proportion of incoming sunlight. Snow cover is therefore an important factor influencing the Earth's surface temperature because it determines how much of the energy from the sun is absorbed by the Earth's surface. A decrease in snow cover contributes to positive feedback because the highly reflective snow surface is replaced by bare soil or vegetation which absorbs more incoming sunlight. This increased absorption of sunlight warms the surface and contributes to additional snow melt in the surrounding area. This effect is called the "snow-albedo feedback."

Snow also insulates the soil beneath the snowpack and protects plants and animals from cold winter temperatures. The amount of winter snow and the frequency of winter thaw events have important consequences for Arctic animals such as muskox and caribou that must travel over snow and forage through the snow to graze. Human-related activities, such as outdoor recreation, snow clearing and reservoir management, are all highly sensitive to how much snow is on the ground and when/how fast it melts.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change uses snow cover, among several variables, to assess long-term changes in climate. Snow cover is considered an [Essential Climate Variable](#) by the World Meteorological Organization–Global Climate Observing System.

Related initiatives

These indicators support the measurement of progress towards the following [2022 to 2026 Federal Sustainable Development Strategy](#) Goal 13: Take action on climate change and its impacts.

Related indicators

The [Sea ice in Canada](#) indicators provide information on variability and trends in sea ice in Canada during the summer season.

The [Temperature change in Canada](#) indicator measures yearly and seasonal surface air temperature departures in Canada.

The [Precipitation change in Canada](#) indicator measures annual and seasonal precipitation departures.

The [Water quantity in Canadian rivers](#) indicators provide a summary of trends and the status of water quantity in rivers at the national, regional and local levels.

Data sources and methods

Data sources

There are 3 indicators for Snow cover in Canada: Snow cover extent, Snow cover duration and Snow water equivalent. The data used for the indicators is current up to 2025.

The snow cover extent and snow cover duration indicators were calculated using an ensemble of 6 different products derived from a variety of sources: optical satellite imagery, snow models driven by atmospheric reanalysis, and satellite remote sensing combined with in-situ snow depth measurements. Four (4) of these datasets were also used to calculate the Snow water equivalent indicators. This multi-dataset approach was developed in the Climate Research Division of Environment and Climate Change Canada.

More information

The time series used for the Snow cover extent indicator are based on input from the 6 datasets described in Table 1, while the Snow water equivalent indicator used only the last 4.

Table 1. Snow datasets used to produce the Snow cover extent, Snow water duration and Snow water equivalent indicators

Dataset	Time period	Variable	Method	Indicator
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Snow Chart Climate Data Record (CDR)	1967 to 2025	Snow cover fraction	Manual analysis of primarily optical satellite imagery	Snow cover extent, Snow cover duration
Rutgers 24km Product	1981 to 2024	Snow cover fraction	Enhanced analysis similar to NOAA CDR but available at 24km resolution	Snow cover extent, Snow cover duration
Crocus-ERA5	1950 to 2025	Snow water equivalent	Crocus physical snow model driven by ERA5 reanalysis	Snow cover extent, Snow cover duration, Snow water equivalent
MERRA-2	1979 to 2025	Snow water equivalent	Modeled snow water equivalent from MERRA2 reanalysis	Snow cover extent, Snow cover duration, Snow water equivalent
Snow CCI CRDPv3.1	1979 to 2022	Snow water equivalent	Satellite passive microwave data and surface snow depth observations	Snow cover extent, Snow cover duration, Snow water equivalent
ERA5-Land	1981 to 2025	Snow water equivalent	Modeled snow water equivalent from ERA5 reanalysis	Snow cover extent, Snow cover duration, Snow water equivalent

The multi-dataset analysis provides monthly snow cover extent values from September 1967 to August 2025. The period from 1972 was used for the indicator because the dataset has some missing data between 1966 and 1971. For datasets providing snow water equivalent, a threshold of 5 mm was used to indicate the presence of snow on the ground. For more information, please see the [Methods](#) section.

Methods

The Snow cover extent indicator shows the area of Canada covered by snow during the months of April, May and June for the years 1972 to 2025. The total area of Canada's land mass covered by snow is estimated from a multi-dataset approach developed in the Climate Research Division of Environment and Climate Change Canada.

The Snow cover duration indicator shows the difference (or departure) between the numbers of days with snow on the ground for the latest year available relative to the 1991 to 2020 reference period. It also shows the snow cover duration trend in Canada from 1981 to 2025.

The Snow water equivalent indicator shows the percent difference (or departure) between the amount of snow water equivalent on the ground for March of the latest year available relative to the average over the 1991 to 2020 reference period. It also shows the March snow water equivalent trend in Canada from 1981 to 2025.

More information

Snow cover extent

The Snow cover extent indicator is based on the monthly snow cover extent values calculated from 6 datasets:

- NOAA Snow Chart Climate Data Record
- Rutgers 24km Product
- Crocus-ERA5
- MERRA-2
- Snow CCI CRDP
- ERA5-Land

In order to merge all snow extent datasets, the climatology and standard deviation of each dataset are adjusted based on the methodology used in [Mudryk et al \(2020\)](#). As part of this process, each dataset's climatology is replaced by the climatology of the Rutgers 24km data, and each dataset's variability is adjusted to that of the ensemble mean standard deviation. The NOAA product is not used to construct the ensemble mean standard deviation. Specifically:

1. The standardized anomalies are calculated using each dataset's own climatology and standard deviation (sampled over 1991 to 2020)
2. These standardized anomalies are then converted back into raw values using the ensemble mean standard deviation and the climatology of the Rutgers 24km data
3. The adjusted Rutgers 24km time series and the 4 adjusted time series derived from snow water equivalent are averaged over the 1981 to 2025 period
4. This average time series is merged with the adjusted NOAA time series over the 1967 to 1980 period in order to extend the record back to 1967

As the NOAA data record is the only one covering the period from 1967 to 1980, this methodology ensures that the transition between the pre- and post-1981 periods (where the number of available data sets changes from 1 to 5) does not contain any discontinuities due to changes in climatology (for example, were the full time series simply averaged together) or variability (for example, were unadjusted anomalies averaged together). The adjustment of the variability of the individual time series is particularly important during June, July and August when NOAA's variability is higher compared to the other data sets. The NOAA climatology was used as no additional verification data are available and, as such, it is assumed to have the best estimate of the historical snow extent.

Snow cover extent - Trend calculation

Non-parametric statistical tests were carried out on temporal snow cover extent data to detect the presence of a linear trend and, if present, to determine the orientation (positive or negative) and magnitude of the rate of change (slope). The standard Mann-Kendall trend test was used to detect trend presence and orientation, while the Sen's pairwise slope method was used to estimate the slope. A trend was reported when the Mann-Kendall test indicated the presence of a trend at the 95% confidence level.

Snow cover duration

For snow cover duration, monthly snow cover fraction maps from individual products were merged using the same method used for snow cover extent but applied on a pixel-by-pixel basis. Two (2) products directly provide snow cover fraction. For the 4 snow water equivalent products, daily snow water equivalent was first converted to monthly snow cover fraction using a threshold of 5mm to indicate the presence of snow on the ground. Daily binary snow presence maps from individual products were

averaged into monthly snow cover fraction maps. From the merged snow cover fraction maps, the number of days with snow cover was then calculated for each snow year by converting monthly snow cover fraction to the equivalent number of days with snow on the ground for each land grid cell in Canada (for example, a monthly snow cover fraction value of 0.5 is equivalent to 15 snow covered days during April since the month has 30 days). Annual snow cover duration departures were then computed by subtracting the 1991 to 2020 reference period average to generate a rasterized departure map. This reference period is used to be consistent with snow cover duration departures derived in the Climate Research Division as part of previous assessments.

Snow water equivalent

For snow water equivalent, the 4 snow water equivalent products listed in [Table 1](#) were merged using the same method used for snow cover extent, but applied on a pixel-by-pixel basis. Trends and departures calculated from the resulting merged product tend to be more accurate than those from individual datasets.⁴ The snow water equivalent indicator is calculated based on results from the month of March, as for much of Canada this is a reasonable estimate of peak snow water equivalent. All trends and departures (differences) were then presented as percent differences relative to the 1991 to 2020 baseline period.

Recent changes

For the Snow cover duration indicator, the period analyzed was extended to 1981-2025 (previously 1999-2023), while the reference period was changed to 1991-2020 for all indicators (previously 1999-2018 for Snow cover duration). Additionally, snow cover duration snow year was previously defined as July 1 of the previous year to June 30 of the label year but is now defined as August 1 of the previous year to July 31 of the label year.

Caveats and limitations

Fall period snow cover data are not included in the Snow cover extent indicator, because the NOAA Snow Chart Climate Data Record and Rutgers 24km product are known to be affected by spurious increasing trends during snow onset. The spring period is less affected by this problem.⁵

Resources

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⁴ Mortimer C et al. (2020) [Evaluation of long-term Northern Hemisphere snow water equivalent products](#).

⁵ Chereque AE et al. (2025) [Determining the cause on inconsistent onset-season trends in the Northern Hemisphere snow cover extent record](#).

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Annex

Annex A. Data tables for the figures presented in this document

Table A.1. Data for Figure 1. Snow cover extent in spring (April, May and June), Canada, 1972 to 2025

Year	April snow cover extent (millions of km ²)	May snow cover extent (millions of km ²)	June snow cover extent (millions of km ²)
1972	7.37	4.51	2.29
1973	6.78	3.65	1.98
1974	7.43	5.68	2.17
1975	7.68	4.40	2.13
1976	6.15	4.08	2.39
1977	6.58	4.12	2.27
1978	7.22	5.03	2.73
1979	7.72	4.85	2.33
1980	6.82	3.49	1.77
1981	6.68	4.30	1.85
1982	7.67	4.54	2.06
1983	6.96	4.42	1.68
1984	6.02	3.57	1.43
1985	7.12	4.44	1.65
1986	6.53	4.28	2.39
1987	5.87	3.87	2.09
1988	6.66	3.96	1.63
1989	7.01	3.89	1.70
1990	6.76	4.19	1.72
1991	6.35	3.79	1.64
1992	6.84	4.76	2.41
1993	5.97	3.59	1.33
1994	6.73	3.91	1.40
1995	6.93	3.45	1.36
1996	7.22	4.78	1.76
1997	7.35	4.47	1.55
1998	5.85	2.99	1.24
1999	6.44	3.87	1.91
2000	6.39	4.22	1.96
2001	6.77	3.87	1.72
2002	7.33	5.00	1.94
2003	6.79	3.94	1.61
2004	6.67	4.99	1.99
2005	6.24	3.64	1.48
2006	6.11	3.37	1.45
2007	6.80	3.97	2.03
2008	7.32	3.81	1.43
2009	7.15	4.56	1.80
2010	5.23	3.41	1.55
2011	7.24	4.25	1.60

Year	April snow cover extent (millions of km²)	May snow cover extent (millions of km²)	June snow cover extent (millions of km²)
2012	6.22	3.85	1.39
2013	7.73	4.35	1.58
2014	7.45	3.99	1.39
2015	6.55	3.56	1.33
2016	6.57	3.40	1.32
2017	6.84	4.10	1.28
2018	7.67	4.25	1.95
2019	6.44	3.93	1.26
2020	7.42	4.69	1.81
2021	6.46	4.34	1.79
2022	7.35	4.37	1.57
2023	7.05	2.81	1.30
2024	6.01	3.34	1.32
2025	6.95	4.09	1.30

Source: Environment and Climate Change Canada (2026) Climate Research Division, Climate Processes Section.