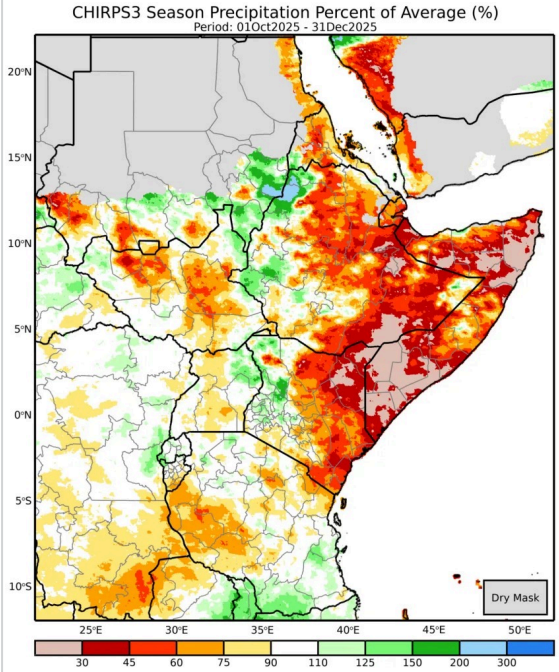
Uncertainty remains high during the March-May season despite an early onset

Key Messages

- Poor crop production is expected during the January–February 2026 harvest across the bimodal regions in Kenya and southern Somalia following extremely poor rainfall performance during the October–December 2025 season.
- Pasture and surface water availability remain below-average following an extremely dry October–December rainfall season, despite a few storms in December that provided short-term relief. These poor conditions are exacerbated by hotter-than-normal temperatures.
- Heavy rainfall since mid-February, with above-average rainfall forecast through mid-March, likely indicating an early onset of the March–May rainfall season across the western sector of the region including western and Central Kenya, much of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania.
- Ethiopia's Belg/Gu/Genna season is off to a slow start with delayed onset already experienced across most parts of the eastern, central and southern regions. However, as the season nears the March–April peak, short-term forecasts indicate a likely improvement in the first two weeks of March.
- The current March–May rainfall outlook is characterized by uncertainty given the high variability in key climate drivers, including a rapidly waning La Niña, forecast ENSO neutral conditions, earlier-than-average northward shift in the Inter Tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ), and the shorter-term influence of the Madden-Julian Oscillation (MJO).

Figure 1

Rainfall Percent of Average (October 01 – December 31) 2025



Source: CHC/UCSB

Seasonal Progress

October – December Season

Context: Between October and December, the following are the areas and names of the rainy seasons underway in parts of East Africa: Short rains (October to December) in Northern, Northeastern, Southern and Coastal Kenya; Long rains in Uganda; Season A rains in Rwanda and Burundi; Deyr rains in Somalia; Deyr/Hageya rains in Southern and Southeastern Ethiopia.

Following a recent field assessment by FEWS NET in January, key insights on crop, livestock and water conditions were acquired across eastern, southeastern, northern, central and coastal Kenya. Overall, cropping conditions were poor across all the counties visited except localized areas in the central counties within the Mt. Kenya region. This follows a poor October–December rainfall season (Figure 1) primarily driven by a negative Indian Ocean Dipole and La Niña conditions across the Pacific.

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The field assessment is typically guided by an initial analysis of the agroclimatic conditions captured by CHIRPS precipitation products, NDVI vegetation health metrics from satellites, and WRSI crop model output. This initial assessment prioritized areas for field visits and provided information on conditions in areas that cannot be visited due to constraints such as insecurity and distance.

Analysis of satellite-based products revealed extremely below-average rainfall across the Eastern half of the region including eastern Kenya, much of Somalia and southeastern Ethiopia. Through this analysis it was ascertained that the cropping outcomes across the 3 countries are likely to be poor. Field visits revealed that pasture and surface water resources had deteriorated faster than usual. Many water points in the surveyed areas were dry, forcing livestock to travel longer distances to access water. A few storms across Kenya in December offered a slight reprieve to the pasture conditions. However, surface water points remained lower-than-average. The same can be replicated to explain conditions across southern Somalia and southeastern Ethiopia given that the satellite images show similar attributes, or even worse in the case of southern Somalia. These poor conditions are likely to continue for the coming weeks as the season is just beginning and the recovery might take longer than typical given that the current March–May rainfall forecasts for Eastern East Africa is likely to be average, which is not a significant amount for the Arid and Semi-Arid (ASAL) regions.

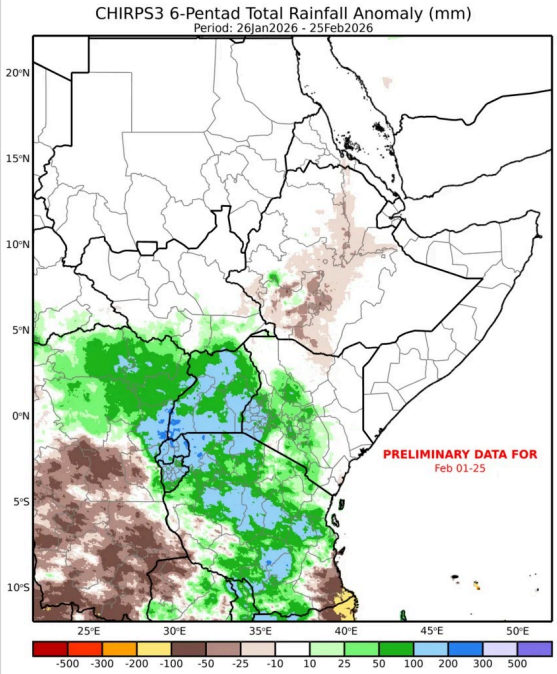
March – May

Context: Between March and November, the following are the areas and names of the rainy seasons underway in parts of East Africa: Gu rains in Somalia; Long rains in unimodal Uganda and Rwanda, and unimodal and bimodal Kenya; Season B (mid-February to May) rains in Burundi; Belg rains (mid-February to May) in Ethiopia, as well as the Diraac/Sugum rains in the northern pastoral areas and Gu/Genna rains in the southern and southeastern pastoral areas of Ethiopia; and the first season rains in the bimodal areas within southwestern Ethiopia, southwestern South Sudan, and northern Uganda.

The western sector of the region including western and central Kenya, most of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi as well as most parts of Tanzania have experienced rainfall since mid-February, which could indicate an early onset of the March–May rainfall season (Figure 2). In Kenya, heavy rainfall has been reported across central and parts of the southeastern counties. This has provided a much-needed reprieve and rejuvenation of pasture and surface water, including seasonal rivers, following a poor OND season. The start of the season for the Kenyan counties comes at a time when harvesting of the OND seasonal crops is being completed and might lead to a rushed start to the March–May planting season. This can lead to both positive and negative impacts given that this is usually the field preparation period. Some farmers might not have adequately prepared their fields, while others might benefit from an early planting season. Similar conditions have been reported across parts of northern Uganda, northern Tanzania and eastern Rwanda. The current conditions can be attributed to two main factors including an early northward shift of the ITCZ as well as influence from an active Madden Julian Oscillation (MJO). Following the short-term forecast, these wetter conditions are likely to continue through mid-March leading to a favourable start to the March–May season. There is considerable uncertainty about rainfall conditions in late March as forecasts indicate mixed conditions. The ECMWF forecasts indicate above-average rains from March 16 to March 30. The SubC model ensemble indicates near-average rains from March 18 to March 31.

Figure 2

Rainfall Anomaly (January 26 – February 25) 2026



Source: CHC/UCSB

In Ethiopia, the Belg season is just beginning and so far, it has been characterized by a slightly delayed onset with most northern regions of the cropping areas already reporting rainfall deficits. This could limit the cultivated area given that some farmers rely on reliable soil moisture to plant. With the seasonal peak typically occurring between March and April, delayed rains may also lead to late planting and put crop phenological cycles out of phase with climatic patterns.

Across the marginal agricultural regions of Kenya, Bay agricultural region in Somalia as well as parts of the Somali region in Ethiopia, the rains are yet to be established and are likely to start on time (mid-March). Parts of southeastern regions of Kenya including Kitui, Machakos and Makueni counties have experienced some rainfall in the last week of February. Pasture and surface water conditions are still drier-than-average across the pastoral regions in Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia (Figure 3). This is likely to remain the same for the next few weeks before the March–May season establishment.

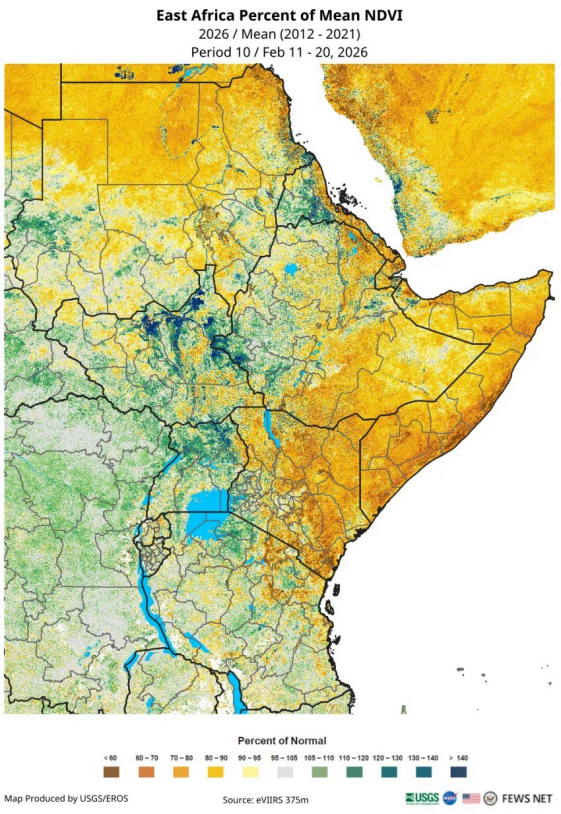
Agroclimatic Outlook

The short-term GFS forecast indicates a slight increase in rainfall in the coming 1–2 weeks as the MAM season gets established. The rainfall regime is shifting northwards into northern Kenya, the Belg cropping region of Ethiopia and parts of southern Somalia (Figure 4). Across the western sector rainfall is likely to continue marking the full establishment of the March–May season. April is regarded as the peak month of the rainfall season and continued rainfall is likely to heighten flood risk especially in Burundi, central Ethiopia, South Sudan, western Kenya as well as the riverine regions of southern Somalia.

Seasonal forecasts indicate a near-normal rainfall season across Eastern East Africa. The temperature forecast indicates hotter-than-normal conditions throughout the season. These factors may limit quick recovery for the pastoral communities given that a near normal season might not have a substantial positive impact in a low rainfall region.

Figure 3

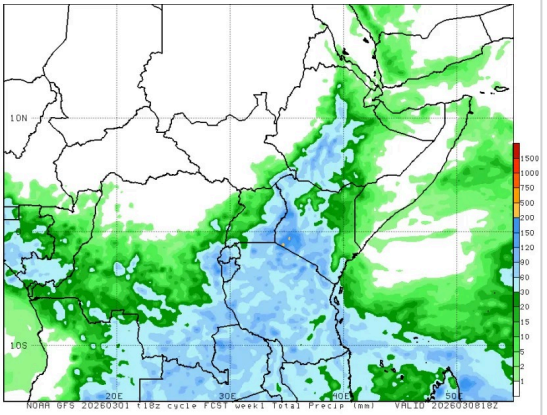
NDVI Percent of Normal (February 11 – February 20) 2026



Source: USGS/FEWS NET

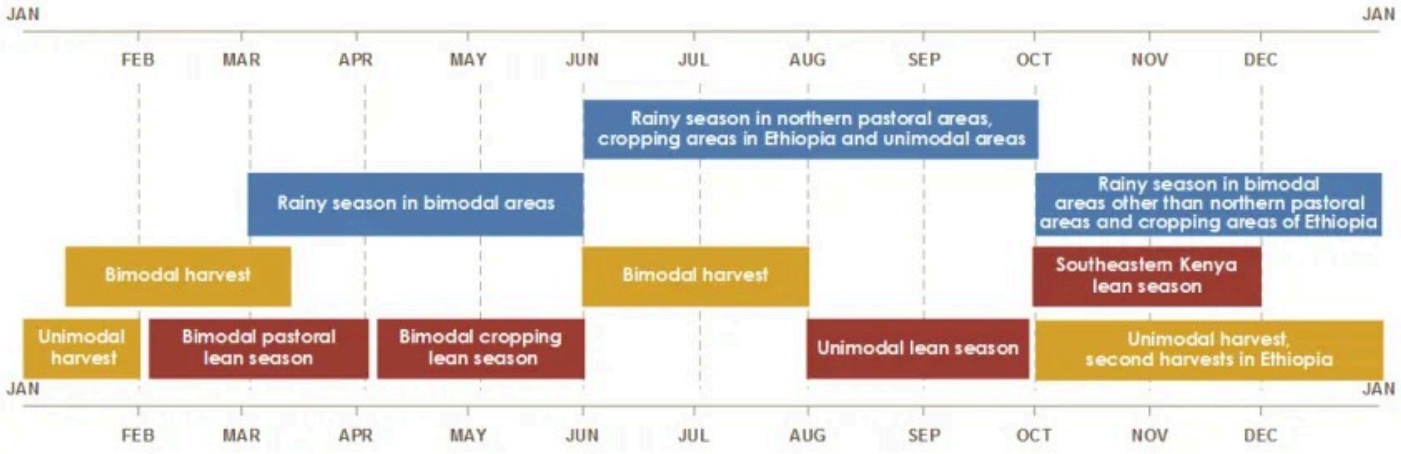
Figure 4

GFS Rainfall Forecast for the period March 3 - March 8, 2026



Source: CPC/NOAA

Seasonal Calendar for a Typical Year



Source: FEWS NET

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Seasonal Monitor

FEWS NET's Seasonal Monitor reports are produced for Central America and the Caribbean, West Africa, East Africa, Central Asia, and Somalia every 10-to-30 days during the region's respective rainy season(s). Seasonal Monitors report updates on weather events (e.g., rainfall patterns) and associated impacts on ground conditions (e.g., cropping conditions, pasture and water availability), as well as the short-term rainfall forecast. Find more remote sensing information **here**.