

# North Island Monthly Fire Danger Outlook (2021/2022 season)

## Issue: October 2021

### Current fire danger situation

In general, monthly fire dangers and fire climate severity are low across much of the North Island (Figures 6-9). The exception is an area around Napier / Hastings where moderate conditions exist.

### Current fuel and soil moisture status

As of 17 October (Figure 2), soil moisture levels are currently near normal for the majority of the North Island. However, in the southern part of Hawke’s Bay and a portion of eastern Northland, soil moisture is below normal for the time of year. Any previous “dry” shading on the [New Zealand Drought Index map](#) has dissipated since last month.

Most of the North Island is currently experiencing low fire danger due to low Fire Weather System Codes and indices (BUI, DC, DMC and FFMC refer appendix for definitions) that result from winter precipitation, and lower temperatures (slower drying rates). The Lower DC and DMC means minimal burning of moderate, heavy or subsurface fuels is likely. Fine fuels will generally be damp but these can dry quickly and carry surface fires during occasional dry windy periods.

The exception to the majority of the North Island is an area around Napier / Hastings where DMC and DCs are not high but are above normal for this time of year and do have the potential for moderate burning of medium, heavy and subsurface fuels. More significantly, this means they have a head start on the drying process as we move toward summer.

### Forecast climate and weather

Late October will favour high pressure at times. However, low pressure located in the Tasman Sea may result in showery weather from approximately 24-27 October. In November, east-northeasterly wind flows are expected to prevail, although occasional westerly winds will remain

possible. Overall wind speeds are expected to be below normal. Looking later into the spring season and early summer, a La Niña event has nearly an 80% chance of developing. La Niña tends to bring more northeasterly winds to New Zealand with wetter conditions in the north and east and drier conditions in the south and west. For more information, see pages 3 and 4.

### What to watch for

Western and southern areas are expected to experience normal or slightly above normal fire danger over the coming months as depicted below.

Watch for areas where grass fuel loads are high due to vigorous grass growth during good spring growing conditions. We may also see complacent behaviors with mild spring fire danger.

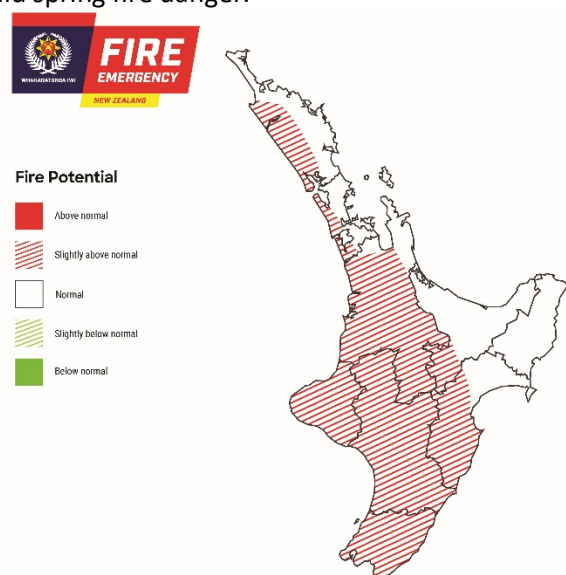


Figure 1: Locations identified as areas of interest that may develop an elevated risk of high to extreme fire danger over the next three months.

## Current climate

In September, near average temperatures were observed across much of the North Island. Small areas of above average temperatures (0.51°C to 1.20°C above average) were observed in the Coromandel and eastern coastal Auckland. A pocket of below average temperatures (0.51°C to 1.20°C below average) occurred in parts of Waikato.

September was wetter than normal for much of the North Island, especially in northern and eastern areas. Above normal (120-149% of normal) or well above normal rainfall (>149% of normal) was observed across most of Northland, Auckland, northern Waikato, Bay of Plenty, eastern and southern Hawke's Bay, parts of Taranaki, Manawatū-Whanganui, and Wellington. Rainfall was below normal (50-79% of normal) or well below normal (<50% of normal) about the Bay of Islands, southern Waikato, northern Taranaki, and the Kāpiti Coast. Near normal rainfall (80-119% of normal) was observed elsewhere.

Soil moisture levels across are currently near normal across most of the North Island. However, in the southern part of Hawke's Bay and a portion of eastern Northland, soil moisture is below normal for the time of year.

## Climate drivers

In September, the Madden-Julian Oscillation (MJO) moved through phases 2-4, resulting in changeable weather patterns across the Southwest Pacific. The suppressed phase of the MJO is likely into November, increasing the chance for high pressure and drier conditions. However, there will still be unsettled conditions at times.

During September, upper-oceanic heat content remained below normal across the equatorial Pacific, particularly in the central part of the basin – a La Niña-like signal. The distribution of anomalies is currently closest to a central Pacific type of La Niña, similar to that of this time last year. A negative Indian Ocean Dipole, referring to well above average sea surface temperatures in the tropical eastern Indian Ocean, continued during October.

The ocean-atmosphere system is likely to continue to trend in a La Niña-like direction. La Niña conditions are favoured to develop over November-January (near 80% chance).

If La Niña develops, it will become a dominant climate driver during the upcoming fire season. La Niña is often associated with more westerlies over New Zealand during spring and north-easterlies during summer, but each La Niña event comes with unique characteristics.

La Niña events tend to bring warmer temperatures and more moisture/humidity to the northern and eastern parts of both islands, although last summer was an exception.

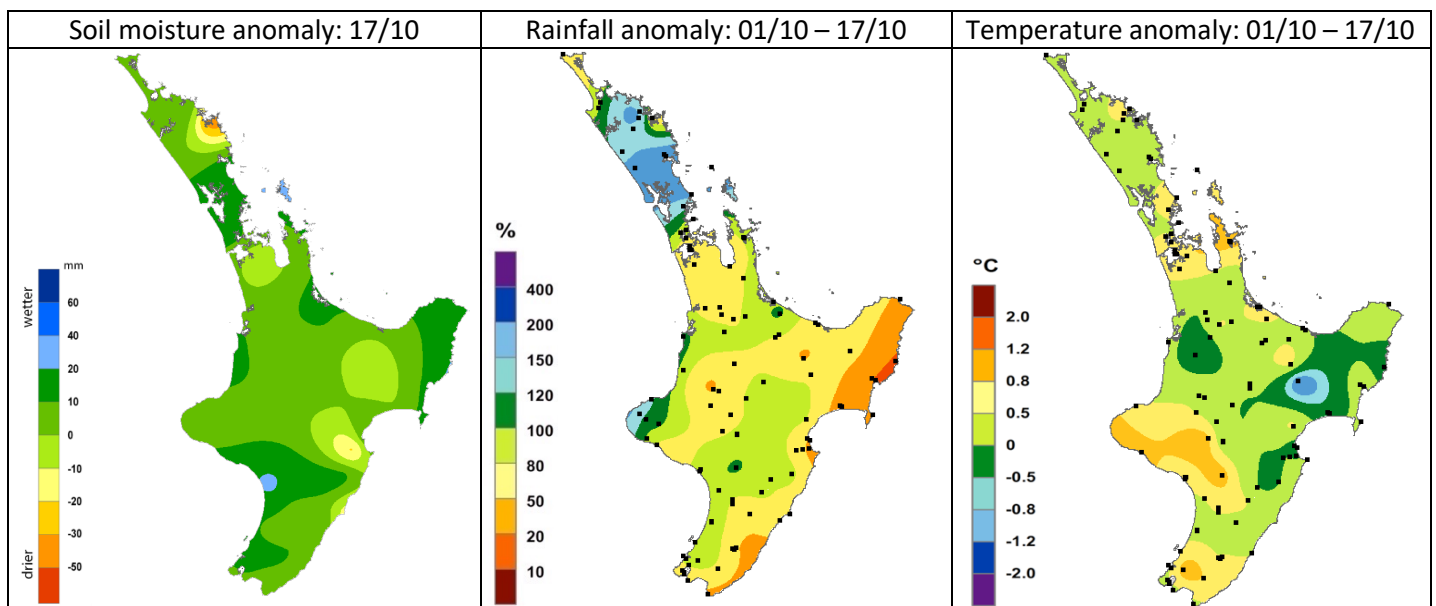


Figure 2: Maps showing the current soil moisture anomaly as well as temperature and rainfall as a difference from normal since the start of the month

## Fire season analogues

To help understand what fire weather conditions may be like this summer, we can look at analogues. Analogues are historical years with similar climatic conditions to the current year.

This summer's analogue years featured historical years that had La Niña-like patterns in the ocean and/or atmosphere (Figure 3). The subjective analogue seasons are selected with expert interpretation from NIWA. The objective analogue seasons are automatically selected via a computer analysis. Where the two methods agree, confidence tends to be higher.

The early signal is for a summer with higher fire weather indices relative to the long-term average, particularly across the interior and west of the North Island. Summer 2020-21 is one of the strongest analogues, placing 1<sup>st</sup> on the forecaster-selected analog list (top) and 4<sup>th</sup> on the computer-selected analog list (bottom). Also high up the analogue ranking is 2012-13. Both of these seasons featured drought conditions in parts of the North Island. Overall, it's an early sign that many regions across the island will need to be prepared for longer dry periods that can enhance fire weather conditions.

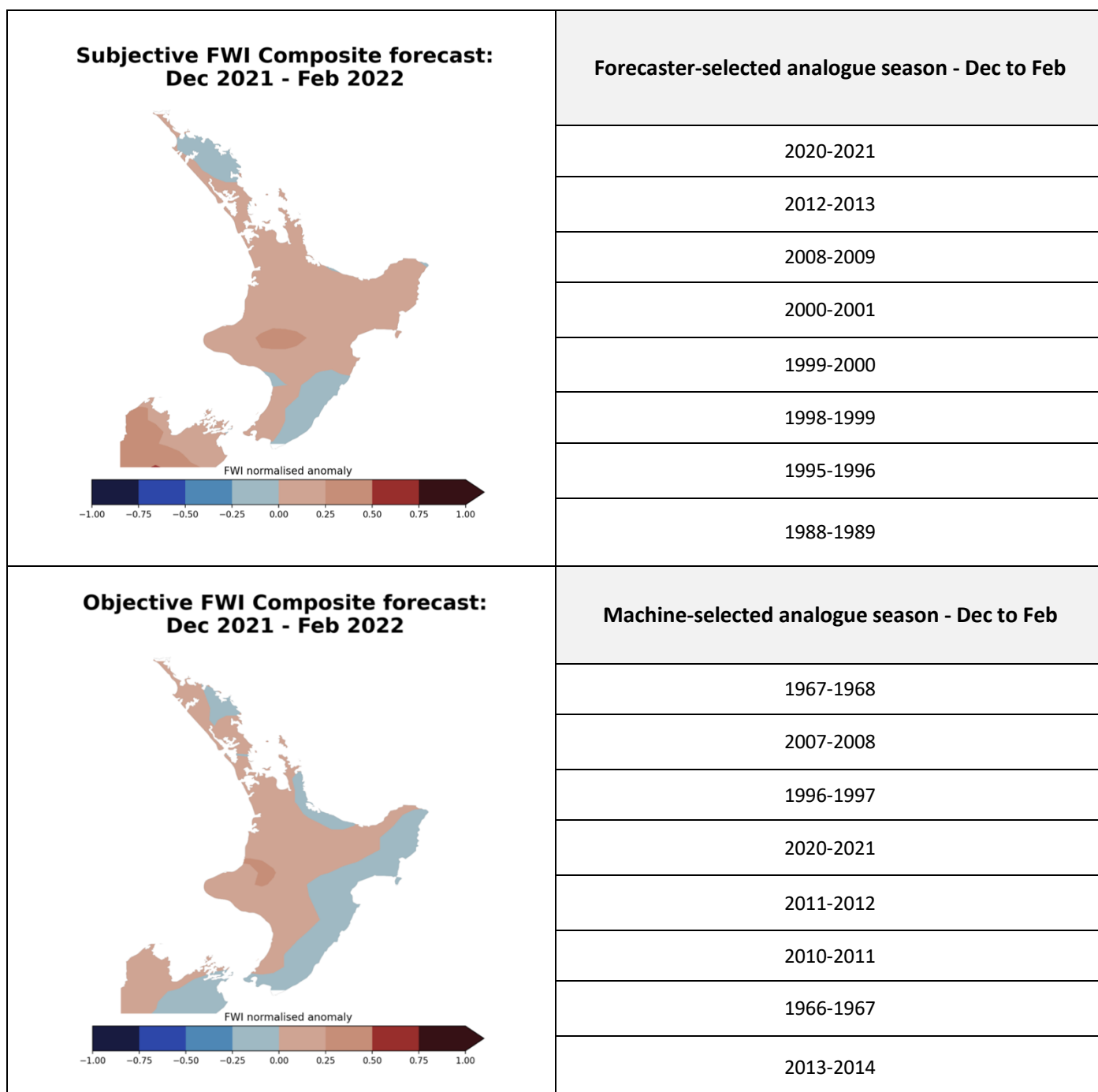


Figure 3: Analogue fire seasons as selected with expert interpretation from NIWA (top) and automated computer analysis (bottom). The fire weather index is a combination of the initial spread index and build-up index, and is a numerical rating of the potential frontal fire intensity. In effect, it indicates fire intensity by combining the rate of fire spread with the amount of fuel being consumed. Here, the fire weather index anomaly is calculated by averaging historical analogue years together and comparing to the average fire weather index between 1991-2020 for relevant season.

### Climate outlook: November

November's air flows are expected to favour an east-northeasterly direction. Despite this, occasional spells of westerly winds are still expected. The outlook has trended drier and warmer compared to last month, especially across the lower and western North Island. However, near average rainfall may still be found in the Far North and near East Cape. Wind speeds are expected to be lighter than normal. Evaporation anomalies look elevated in the North Island. Relative humidity may be higher than normal in the north and east of the North Island.

### Climate outlook: November - January

Late spring and early summer are expected to have more easterly quarter winds than normal. Above average temperatures are most likely, particularly in the west of the North Island. Rainfall looks to be near normal to below normal in many regions, with the driest relative to normal in the south and west. Sub-tropical lows may bring a chance for periodic downpours to the north and east, but shouldn't be relied upon for consistent moisture. Wind speeds continue to look lighter than normal.

The tropical cyclone season for the Southern Hemisphere runs from November to April, with the odd TC occurring outside this period. On average, at least one ex-tropical cyclone passes within 550 km of New Zealand each year. This season the risk is considered elevated compared to normal.

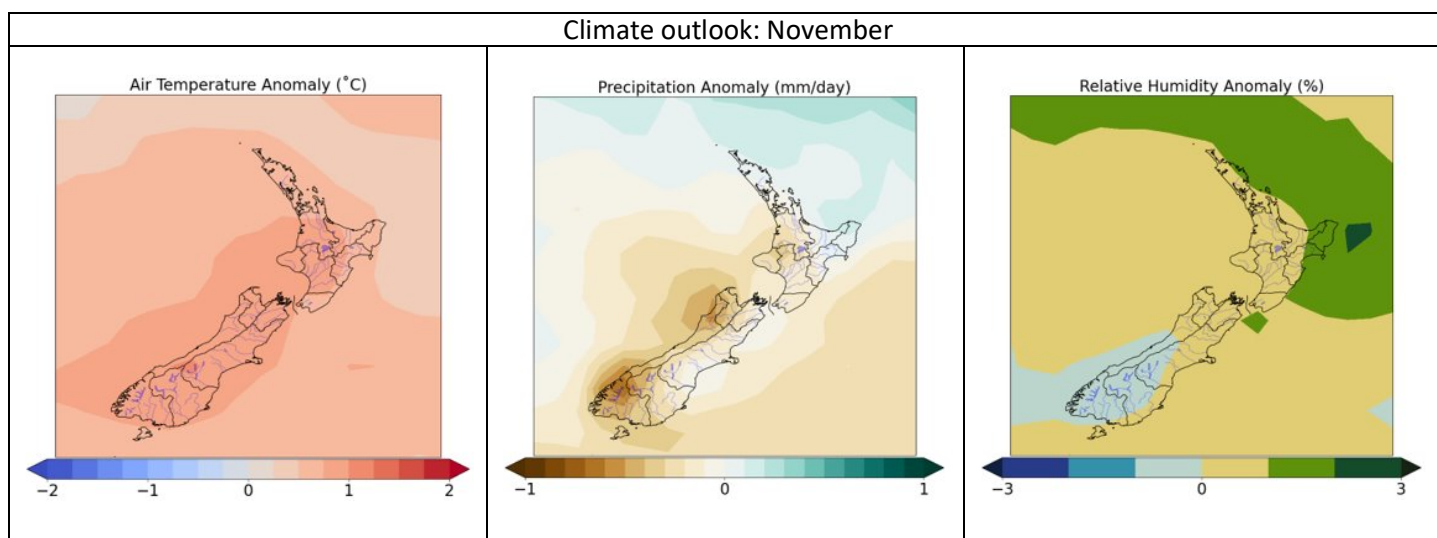


Figure 4: Climate outlook for November showing forecast temperature (left), rainfall (middle) and relative humidity (right) anomalies.

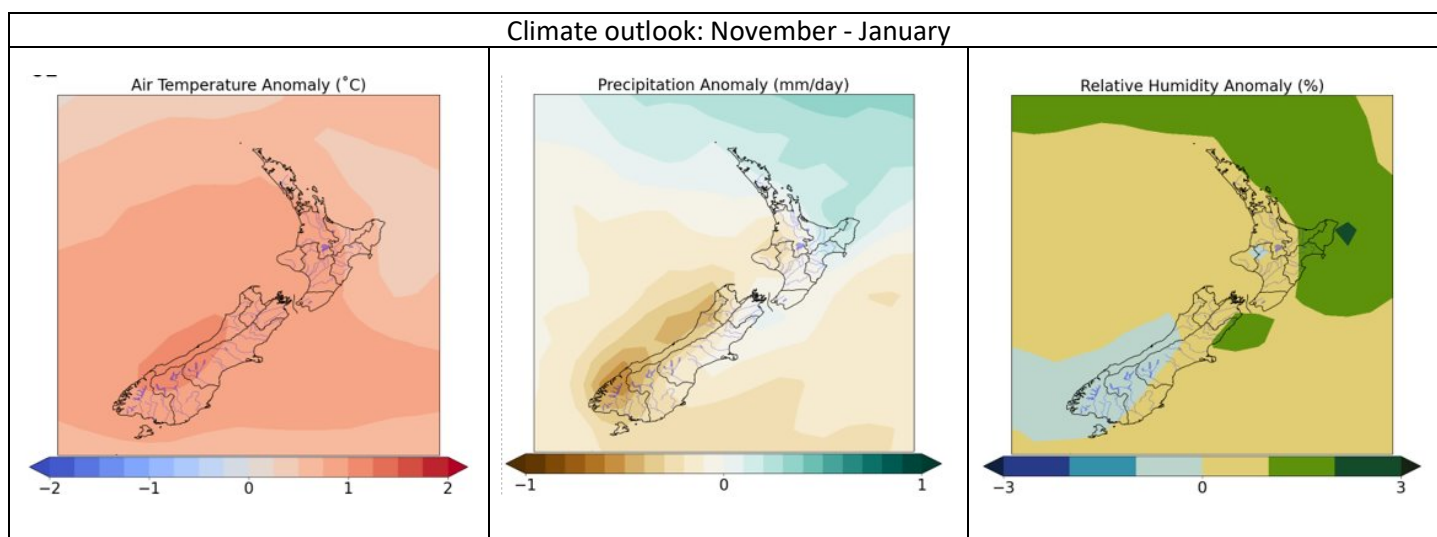


Figure 5: Climate outlook for November-January showing forecast temperature (left), rainfall (middle) and relative humidity (right) anomalies.



## Expected impact on fuels and fire danger

Fine fuel moisture is critically important to fire behavior with lower moistures resulting in easier ignitions and faster spread rates. Fine fuel moistures are affected by temperature, wind, humidity and precipitation. Based on the outlook above it is anticipated that drying rates will be increased by warmer temperatures in most parts of the North Island, but this will be offset in the east and North by normal or above normal humidity and precipitation.

Anticipated lower wind speeds are likely to see less frequent wind driven fires and generally reduced spread rates, although the reduction may be offset by lower than normal fine fuel moistures in the west and south as described above.

Looking to November and beyond the changing of the season will see increasing availability of medium, heavy and subsurface fuels as they dry out. The moisture of these fuels has less of an impact on fire spread rates but as they dry the fuel availability increases, resulting in greater fire intensity making suppression more difficult. The drying of these fuels is dependent on temperature, precipitation and to some degree humidity. The outlook above indicates that the medium and heavy fuel availability will likely be about normal in the north and east but are likely to be about or greater than normal in the west.

The net effect of the climatic outlook is that western parts of the North Island are likely to have normal or slightly higher than normal Fire Danger while the eastern parts of the North Island with the easterly wind flows are expected to receive more humidity and precipitation and have about normal fire danger. There will however be periods when the westerly flows return and especially if they are strong and not accompanied by precipitation, they are likely to result in spikes in the fire danger. It

should also be noted that although eastern parts are not expected to have higher than normal fire danger, their normal fire danger is relatively high.

## Grass growth & curing

Most of the North Island has experienced good growing conditions. Warm winter/spring with average or above rainfall makes for good growing conditions, from which we can expect many areas will have increased fuel loads, especially where grazing has not kept up with the grass growth.

Grass fuels generally only burn in exceptional conditions (low humidity and high winds) if they are less than 50% cured i.e. less than 50% brown or dead material. Subject to weather and topography influences, grass fire ease of ignition, intensity and spread rates increase steadily as the curing percentage increases. At 50% cured grass produces slow moving fires and small flames, with 100% cured grass able to produce extreme flame lengths and intensities.

Curing for most pasture species occurs as a natural process with summer drying and seed set, the timing of this will vary between regions and seasons. Some areas will also be subject to frost curing where there is a build-up of dead material over winter. This is then replaced by a green spring flush but also some species, especially tussocks, have lower moisture levels in their live materials in order to survive severe winter frosts. This is why we often see tussock fires in the early spring. The temperatures will now be increasing but the winter frost cured material may still be present.

Many fires start in fine fuels such as grass which ignite easily and rapidly spread to other fuels. Grass fuel loads and curing rates should be monitored closely as a critical factor in assessing fire danger.



Wind driven Fire in frost cured tussock – Old Dunston Road Fire Nov 2019 .

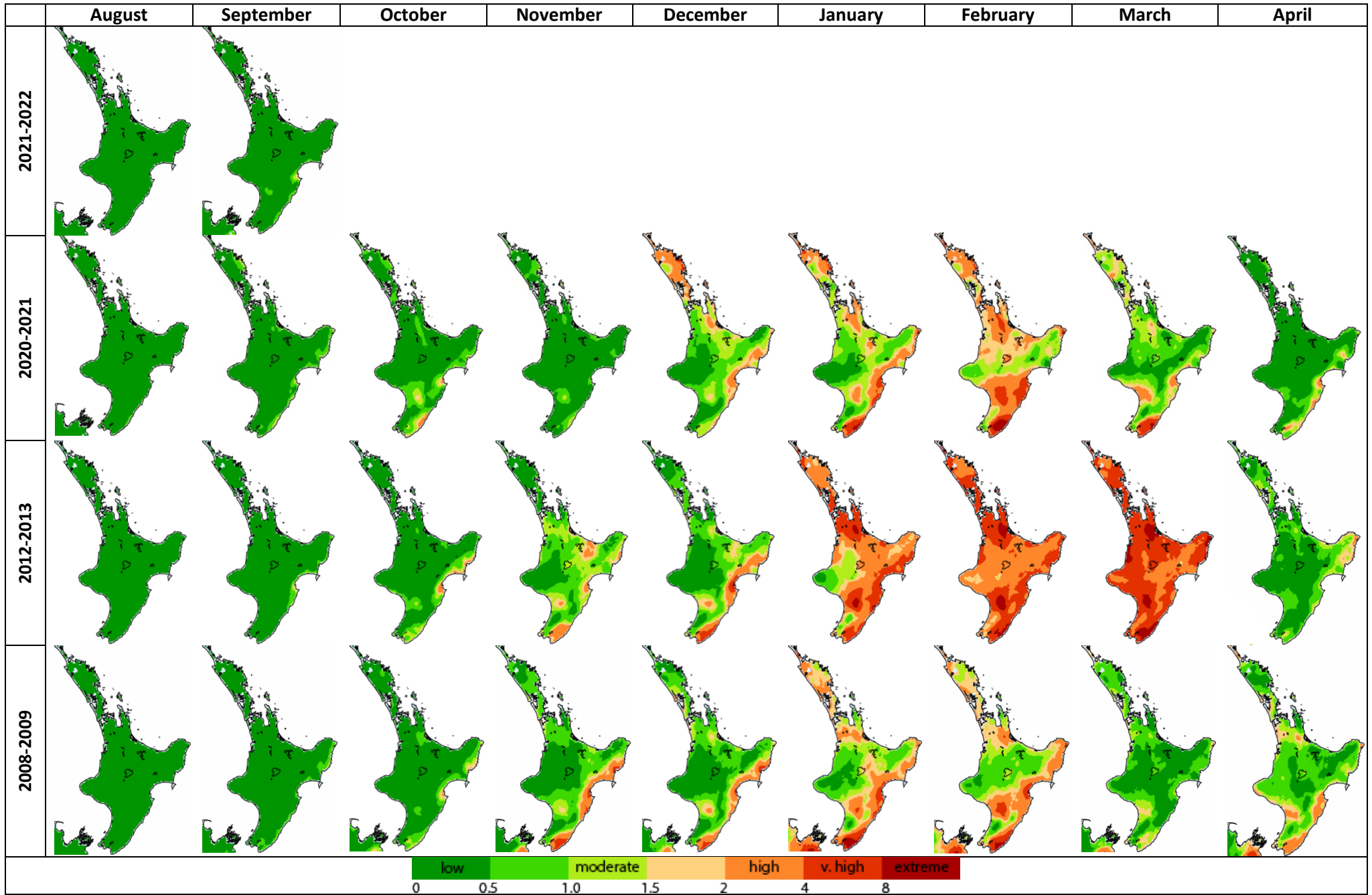


Figure 6: Monthly average severity rating for September and the years 2020/21, 2012/13 and 2008/09. These are analogue years for the current season and give us an insight what the upcoming season may be like.

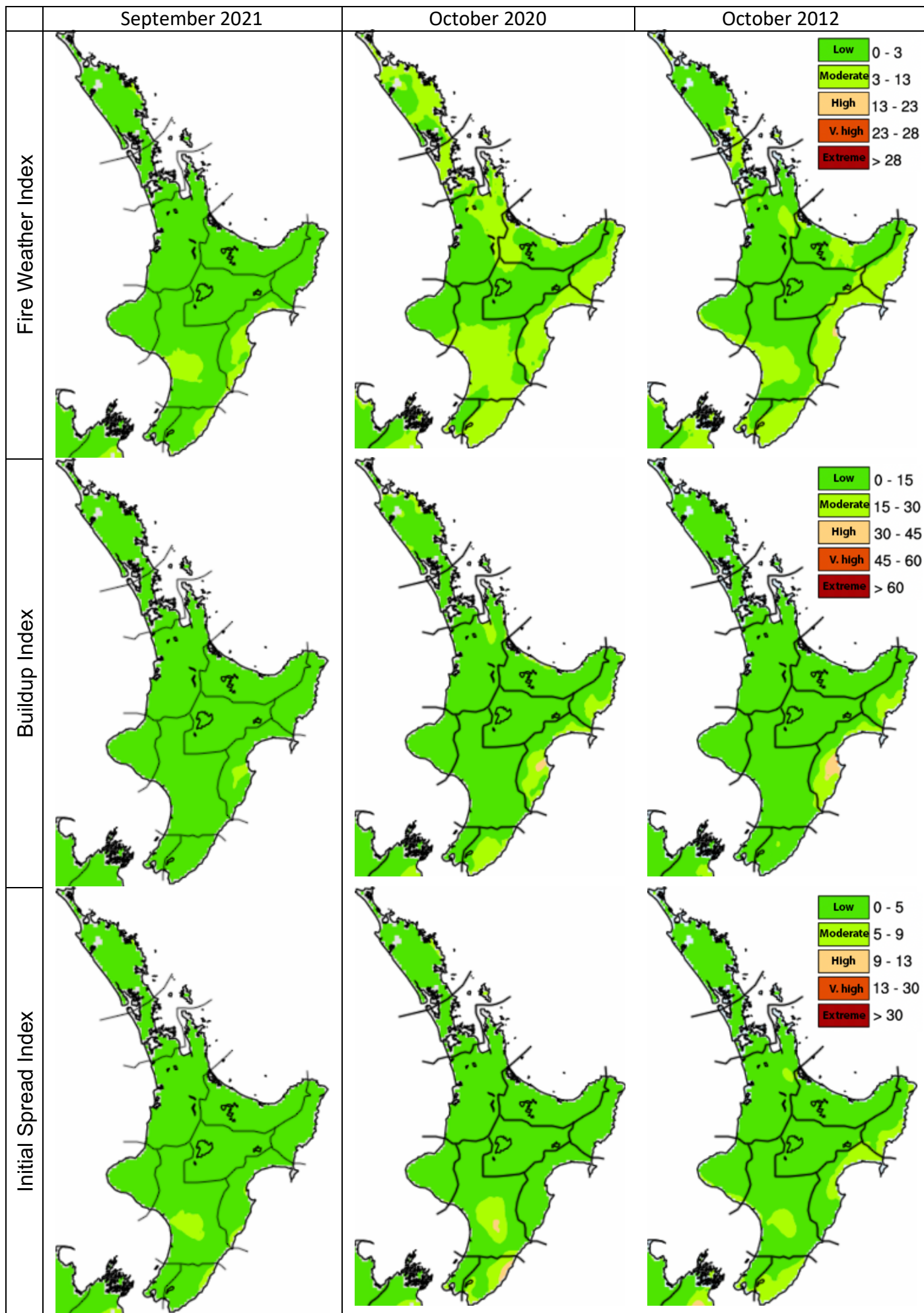


Figure 7: Previous (left row) and expected (middle and right rows) monthly average for the Fire Weather Index (top), Buildup Index (middle) and Initial Spread Index (bottom).



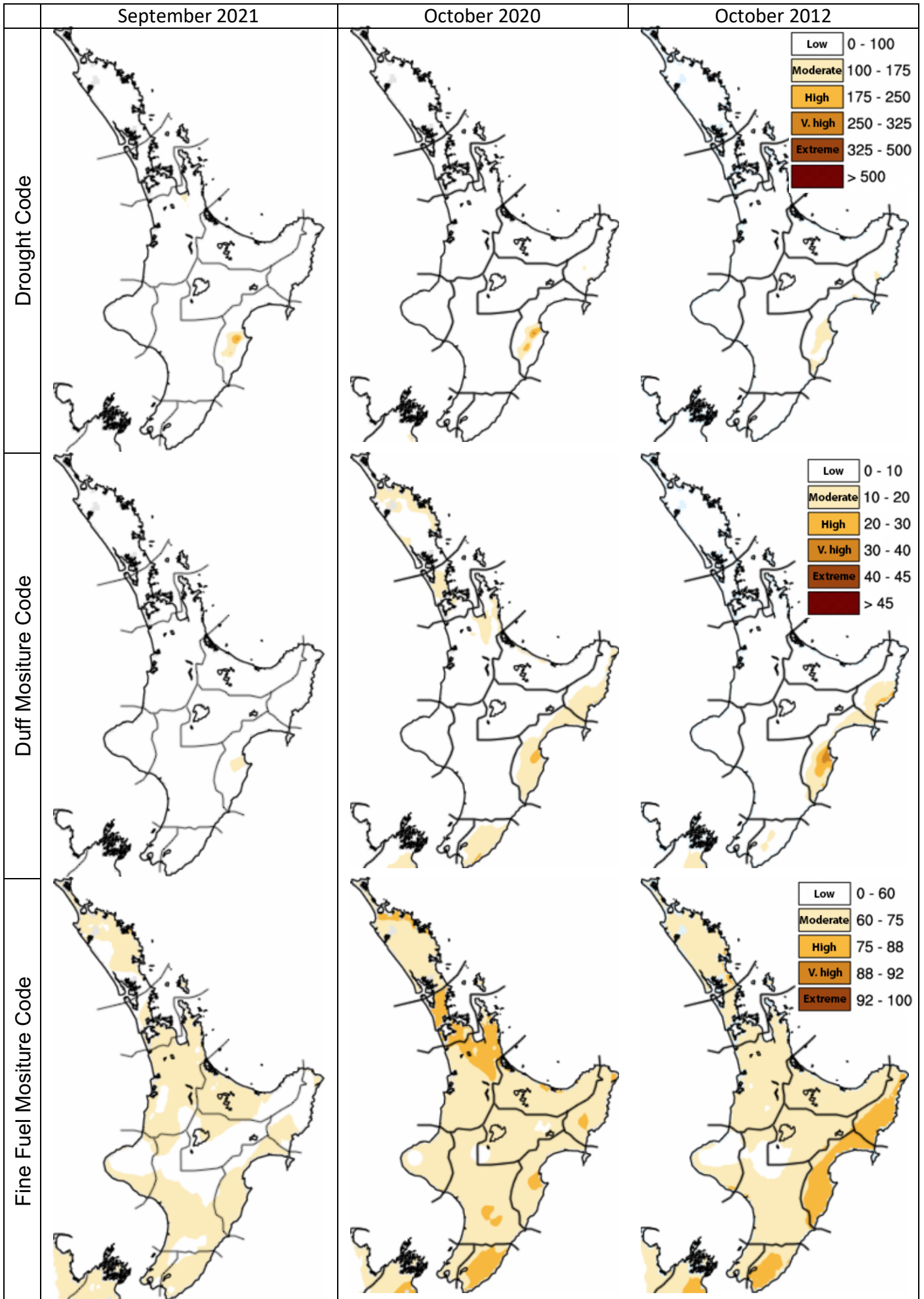


Figure 8: Previous (left row) and expected (middle and right rows) monthly average for the Drought Code (top), Duff Moisture Code (middle) and Fine Fuel Moisture Code (bottom).



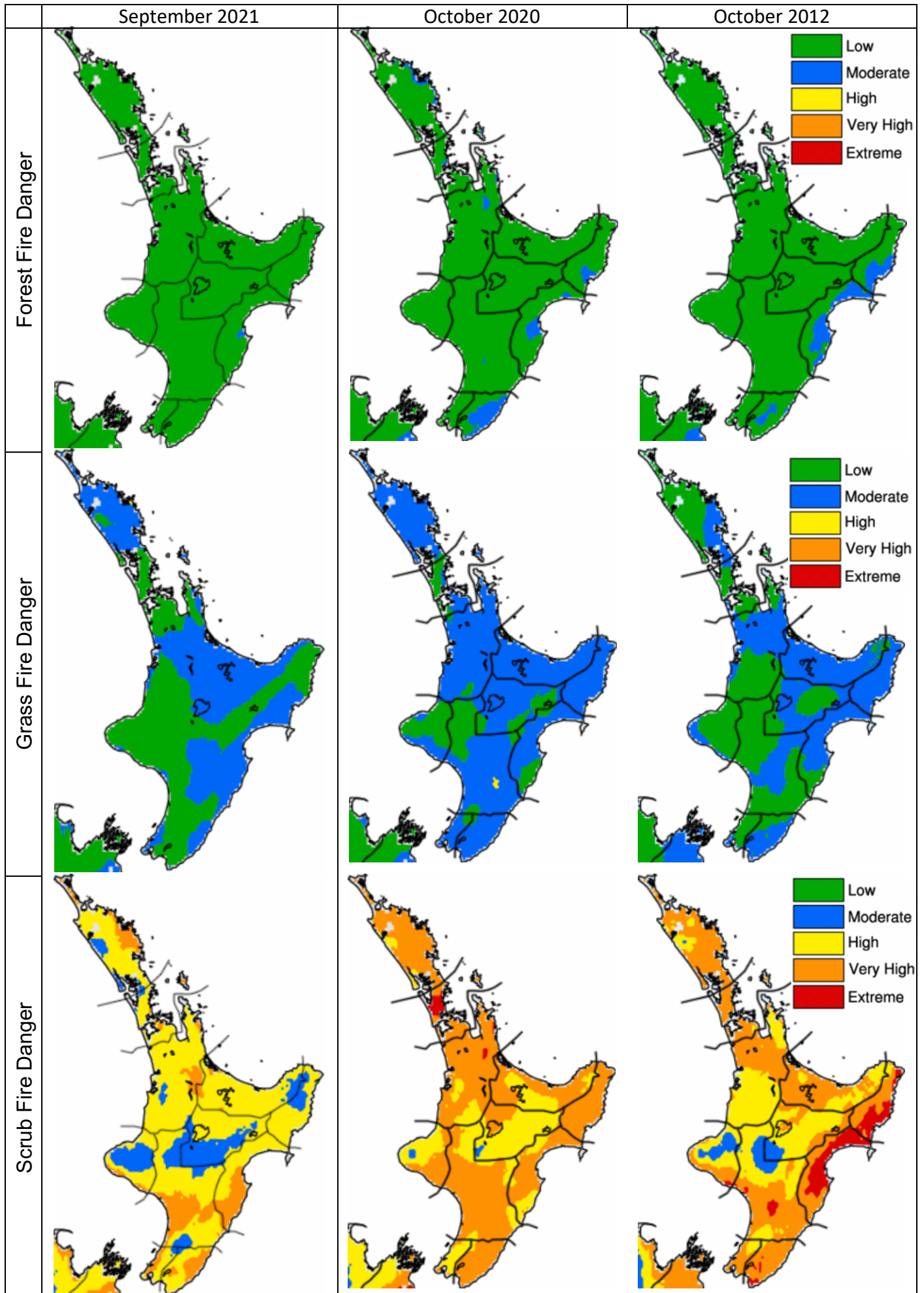


Figure 9: Previous (left row) and expected (middle and right rows) monthly average for the Forest Fire Danger (top), Grass Fire Danger (middle) and Scrub Fire Danger (bottom).

## Background information on fire weather indices and codes

### Fine Fuel Moisture Code:

An indicator of the relevant ease of ignition and flammability of fine fuels.

0-74	Difficult
75-84	Moderately easy
85-88	Easy
89-91	Very Easy
92+	Extreme Easy

### Duff Moisture Code:

A rating of the average moisture content of loosely compacted organic soil layers (duff/humus) of moderate depth, and medium-sized woody material.

0-10	Little mopup needs
11-20	Moderate
21-30	Difficult
31-40	Difficult & extended
41+	Extreme & extensive

### Drought Code:

A rating of the average moisture content of deep, compact, organic soil layers, and a useful indicator of seasonal drought effects on forest fuels and amount of smouldering in deep duff layers and large logs.

0-100	Little mopup needs
101-175	Moderate
176-250	Difficult
251-300	Difficult & extended
301+	Extreme & extensive

**Buildup Index:** Combines the DMC and DC, and represents the total amount of fuel available for combustion.

0-15	Easy control
16-30	Not difficult
31-45	Difficult
46-59	Very difficult
60+	Extremely difficult

### Initial Spread Index:

Combines the effect of wind speed and the FFMC, providing a numerical rating of potential fire spread rate.

0-3	Slow rate of spread
4-7	Moderate fast
8-12	Fast
13-15	Very fast
16+	Extremely fast

### Fire Weather Index:

Combines the ISI and BUI to indicate the potential head fire intensity of a spreading fire (on level terrain).

0-5	Low fire intensity
6-12	Moderate
13-20	High
21-29	Very high
30+	Extreme

**Daily Severity Rating:** A numerical rating of the daily fire weather severity at a particular station, based on the FWI. It indicates the increasing amount of work and difficulty of controlling a fire as fire intensity increases. The DSR can be averaged over any period to provide monthly or seasonal severity ratings.

**Monthly Severity Rating:** is the average of the DSR values over the month. DSR and MSR captures the effects of both wind and fuel dryness on potential fire intensity, and therefore control difficulty and the amount of work required to suppress a fire. It allows for comparison of the severity of fire weather from one year to another.

0-1	Low fire behaviour potential
1-3	Moderate fire potential
3-7	High to very high fire potential
7+	Extreme fire behaviour potential

This document was prepared by NIWA in collaboration with Fire and Emergency NZ

