UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
Agriculture and Natural Resources

November 2026 El Niño Update

California Institute for Water Resources
University of California Agriculture & Natural Resources

Prepared by Daniel L. Swain, PhD | Nov. 6, 2026
Climate Scientist, California Institute for Water Resources
University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources

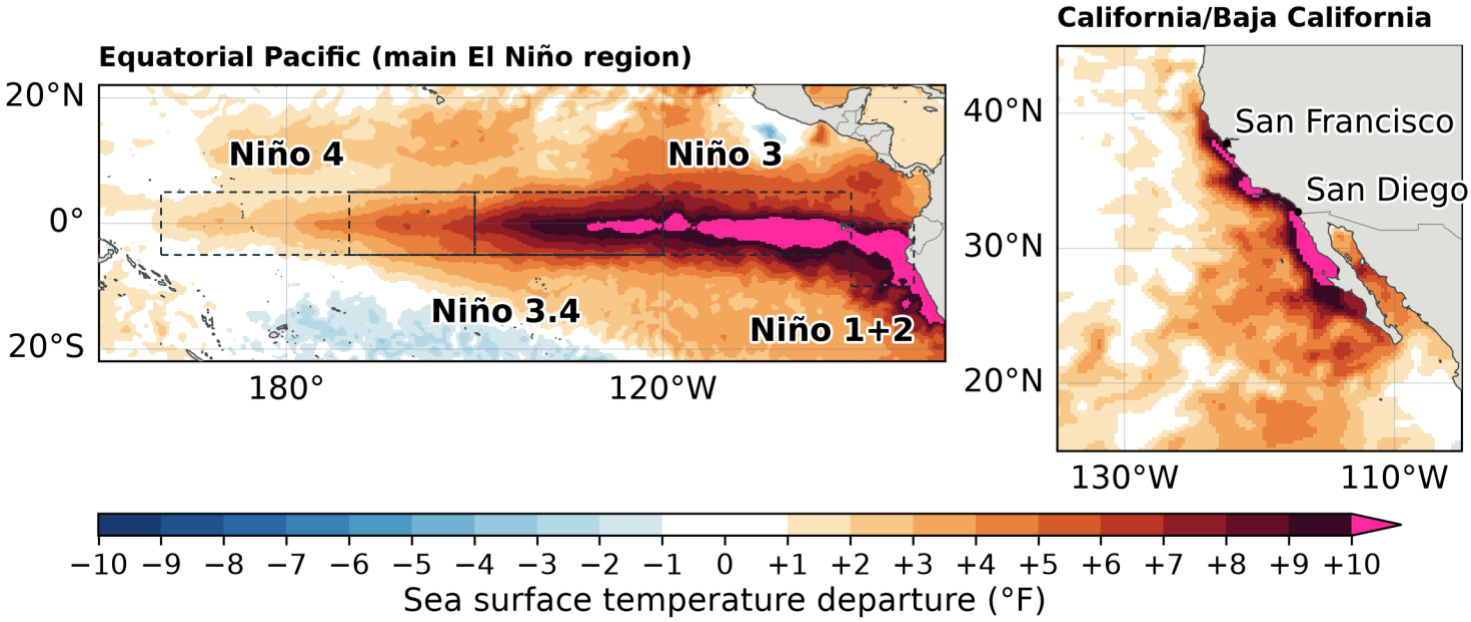


Figure 1. Seven-day sea surface temperature departures from average, October 29–November 4, 2026, relative to 1981–2010. NOAA OISST v2.1. Analysis: Daniel Swain.

What is El Niño, and how can it affect California?

- El Niño is an episodic warming of the eastern tropical Pacific Ocean that releases stored ocean heat into the atmosphere, affecting global weather patterns.
- El Niño intensity is defined by the magnitude of unusual warmth of tropical ocean waters in a region west of the Galapagos Islands (i.e., the Niño 3.4 region, Fig. 1).
- El Niño does not “come to” or “arrive in” California—nor is it defined by storminess or rainfall.
- El Niño can have weather, climate, and oceanographic effects in California.
- **When El Niño is sufficiently strong and ocean warming is concentrated in the eastern tropical Pacific, it can temporarily raise sea level along the California coast and shift the storm track toward the state, potentially raising the risk of both coastal and inland flooding.**
- While El Niño (and its cool phase counterpart, La Niña) is a natural climate variation, it does interact with human-caused climate change, and warming can amplify its temperature, precipitation, and sea level-related impacts.

What is the current status of and forecast for El Niño?

- As of early November 2026, El Niño is already among the strongest—if not the strongest—on record for this time of year, with further intensification expected.
- Ocean surface temperatures are now much warmer than average along most of the California coast, and are 8 to 10°F warmer than average (record warm) from about Pt. Reyes (Marin County) southward to and past San Diego (Fig. 1).
- Due to a combination of El Niño-related warming (leading to thermal expansion of seawater) and alongshore water surges (i.e., "Kelvin waves"), along with the lingering effects of a pre-existing marine heatwave, California coastal water levels are already running as much as 1-2 feet above predicted astronomical tides.
- **The 2026-2027 event is very likely (>80%) to become the strongest on record using NOAA's official climate change-adjusted metric (the Relative Oceanic Niño Index, or RONI), and is already the strongest on record for this time of year by other metrics (including the Oceanic Niño Index, or ONI).**

What kind of impacts can California expect in 2026-2027?

- El Niño, especially when weak to moderate in intensity, does not always offer a clear signal regarding potential California weather risks, but very strong events, especially those centered very far eastward in the Pacific Ocean (like this year's), can produce stronger, more widespread, and relatively more certain effects.
- This winter, 1-2 foot sea level increases will likely recur, and could cause even higher absolute water levels than have recently been observed during the period of peak astronomical tides (i.e., "king tides," which occur from late November through late January). Major, possibly record-breaking, coastal erosion and flooding are possible—especially if a storm coincides with king tides.
- The latest forecasts continue to suggest a greatly elevated likelihood of a wetter-than-average rainy season statewide (not only in Southern California), and elevated odds of heavy rain events that could lead to increased inland flood risk.

What can Californians do to prepare?

- Highest risk of coastal flooding will be from late November through late January, and of inland flooding from December through March. There's still time to prepare!
- Know whether you live in, work in, or travel to potential flood risk zones. If so, consider preparing your home (clearing gutters and drainage culverts, obtaining sandbags, etc.), and/or planning alternate work commute/travel arrangements.
- In some areas, the risk of both landslides and power outages may be higher than usual this winter. Monitor steep slopes for signs of new cracks or significant erosion, and keep devices charged when storms are in the forecast.
- Have multiple ways (e.g., TV, radio, web, Watch Duty app, battery-powered NOAA weather radio) to receive important emergency information from officials.

Resources

California Institute for Water Resources: Flood and El Niño Preparedness.

Weather West YouTube channel: regular weather and climate updates.