



NWS Reno 2026-27 Winter Outlook

El Niño is All the Rage This Winter!

weather.gov/reno

Weather Forecast Office

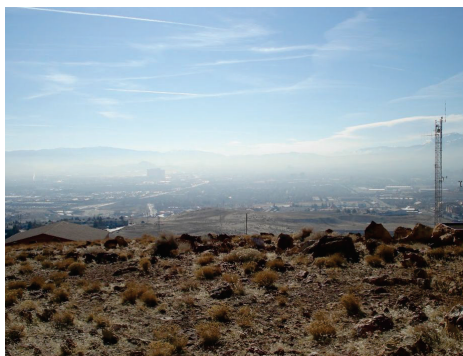
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Wednesday, October 21

775-673-8100



June Lake Blizzard Jan 2021 - CalTrans D9



Which scenario may play out this winter?

Tim Bardsley

Senior Service Hydrologist

National Weather Service

Reno, Nevada

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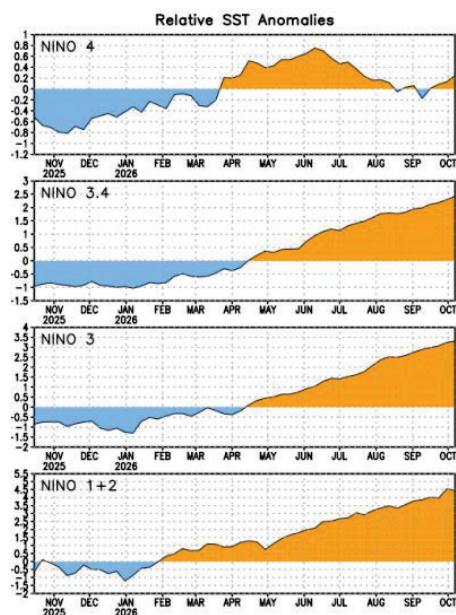


Fall->Winter 2026-27: Very Strong El Niño

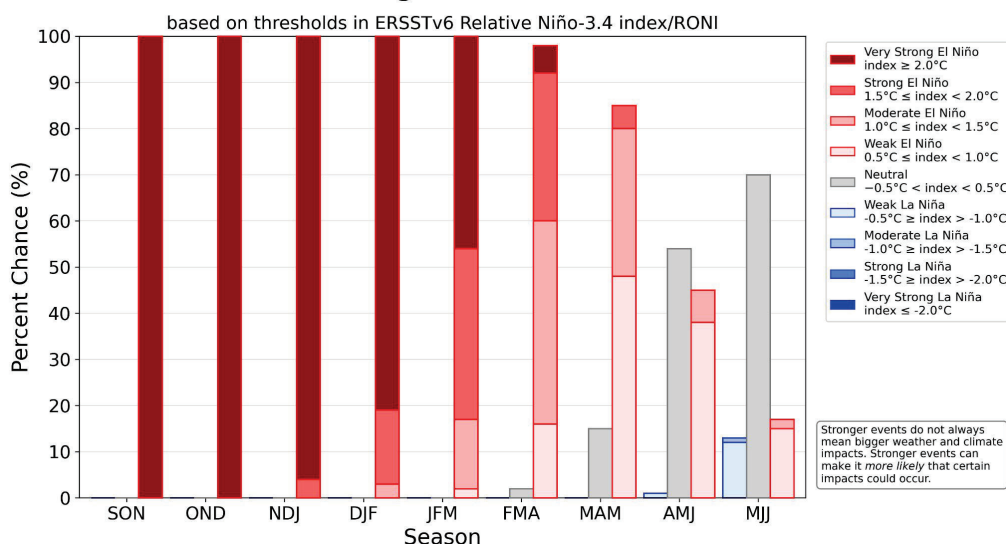
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NOAA CPC ENSO Strength Probabilities (issued October 2026)



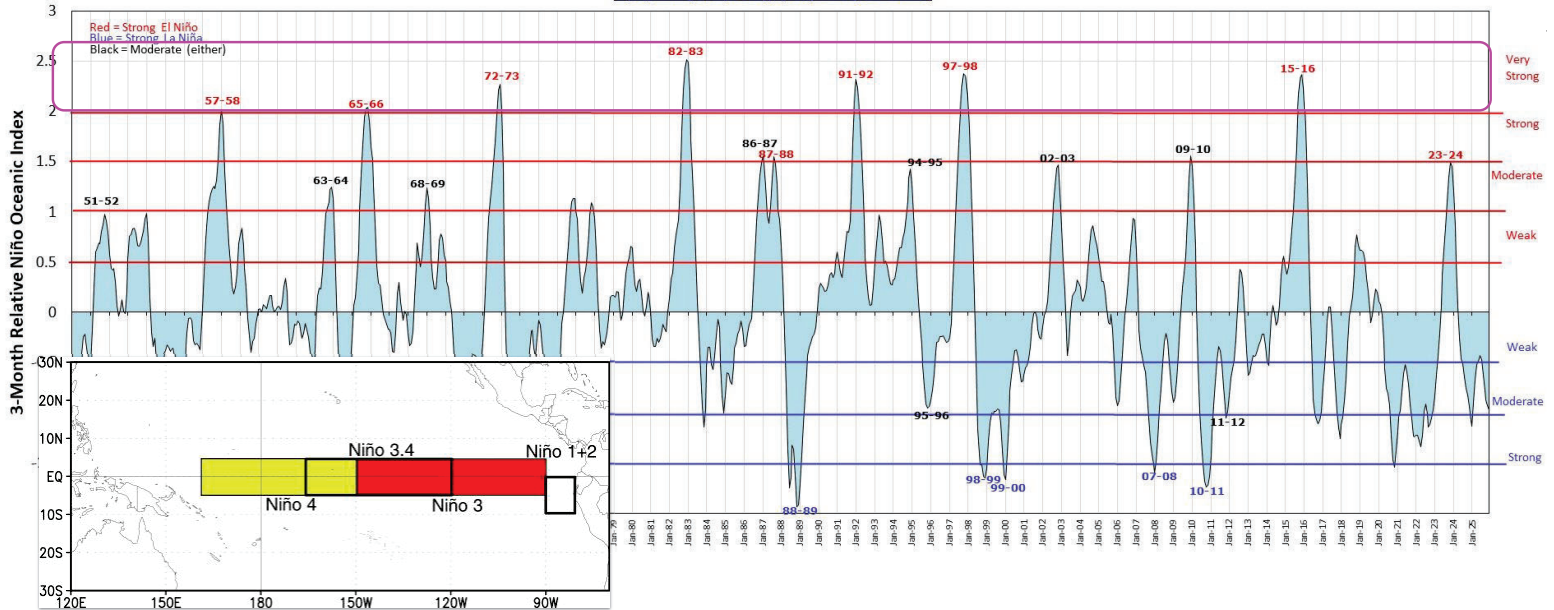
➔ There's a greater than 90% chance for a very strong El Niño this Fall and Winter

➔ There's a 83% chance* this will be of historic strength going back to 1950

* 83% chance Oct-Dec, 70% chance Nov-Jan

Relative Oceanic Niño Index (RONI)

<https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/data/indices/RONI.ascii.txt>



ONI measures temperature departures in one Pacific region (Niño-3.4). RONI measures those departures relative to the departures across the broader tropical oceans, which better represents the physics that drive ENSO impacts.

Very Strong (6 events) RONI 2.0+:
1965-66
1972-73
1982-83
1991-92
1997-98
2015-16

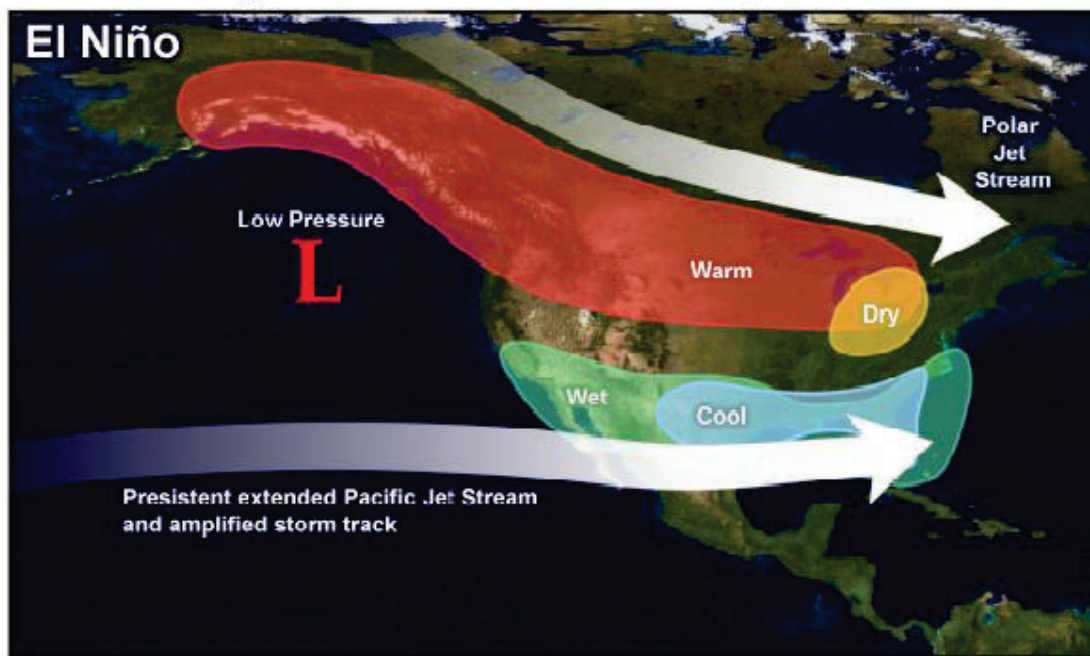
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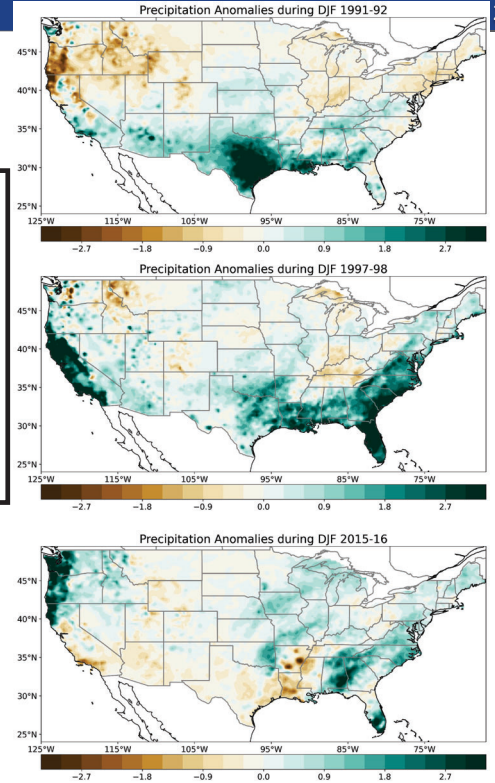
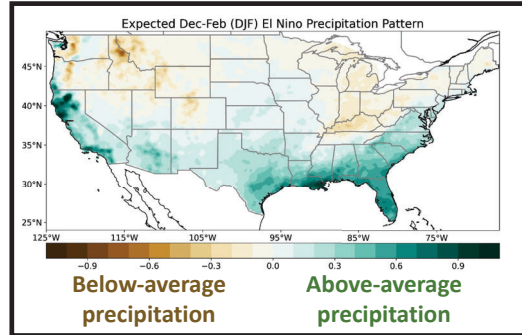
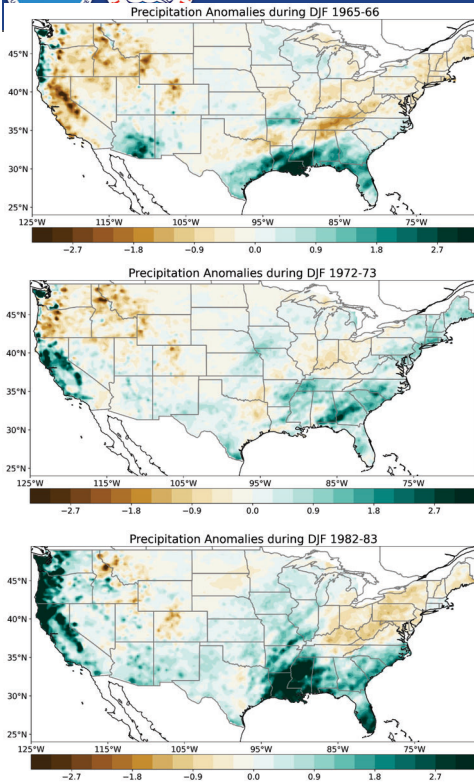
"Typical" El Niño Winter Pattern

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Typical Climate Pattern for the U.S. during El Niño

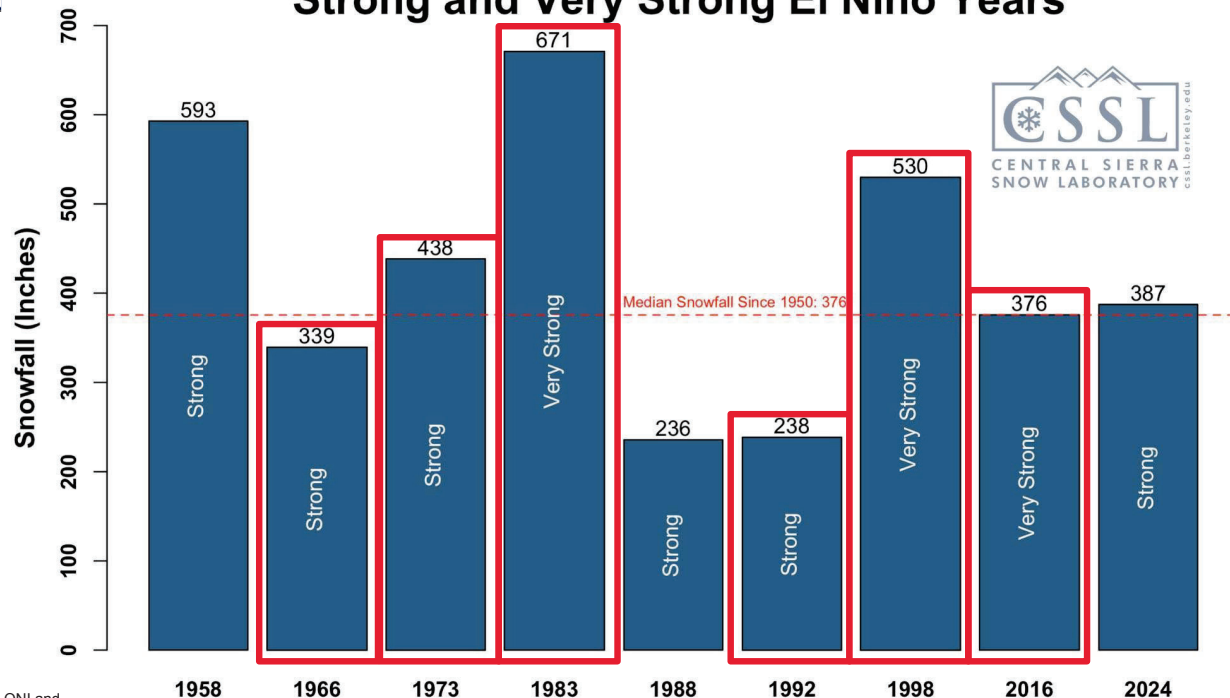


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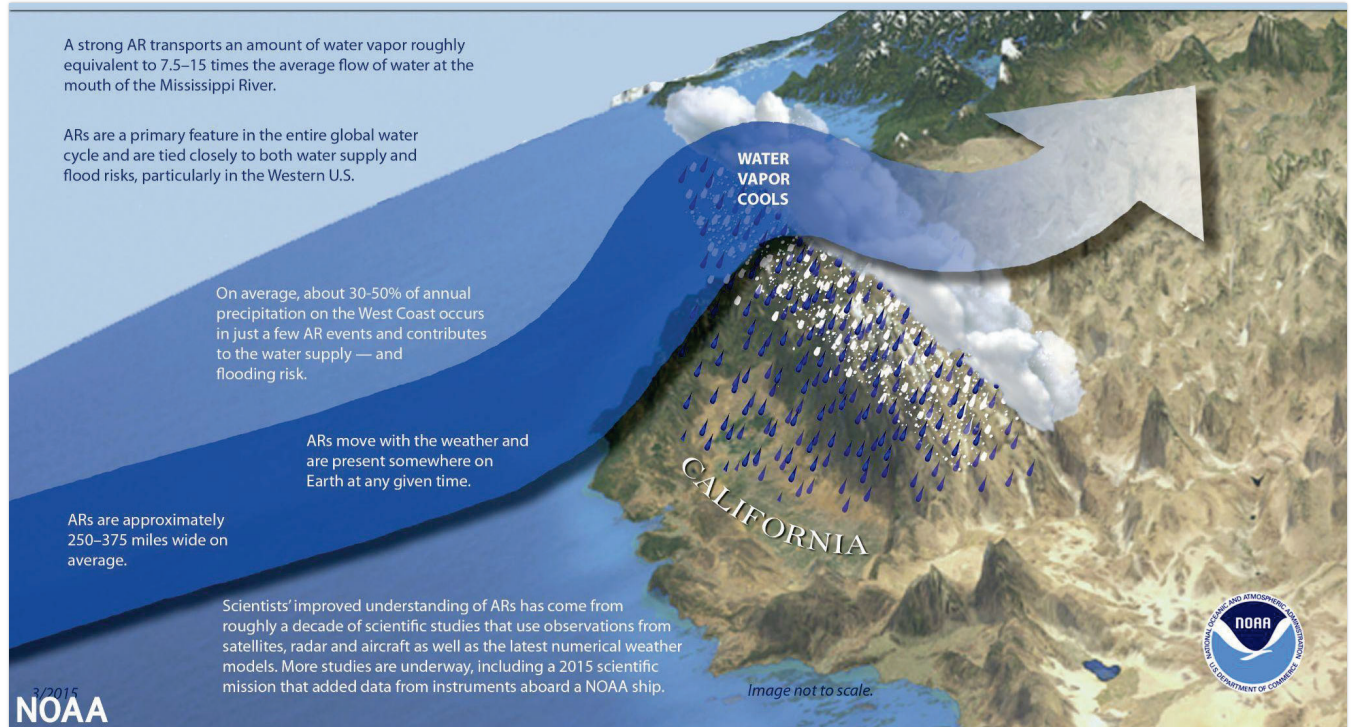
CPC Gauge-based Unified data (mm/day)

Snowfall at the Central Sierra Snow Lab Strong and Very Strong El Niño Years

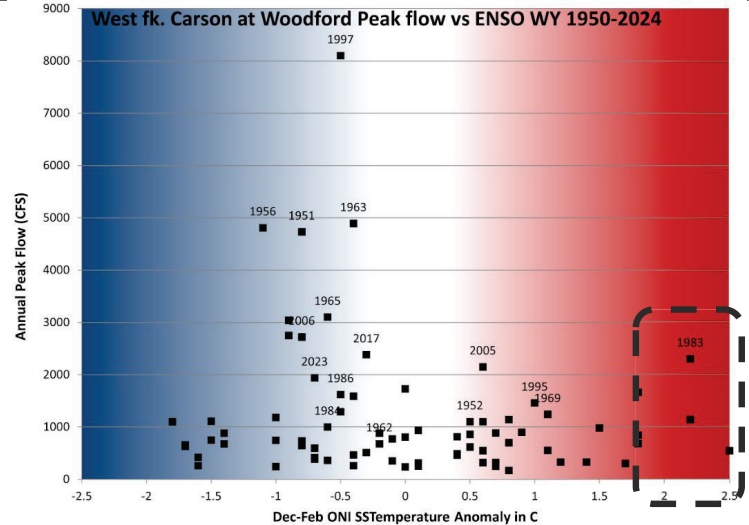
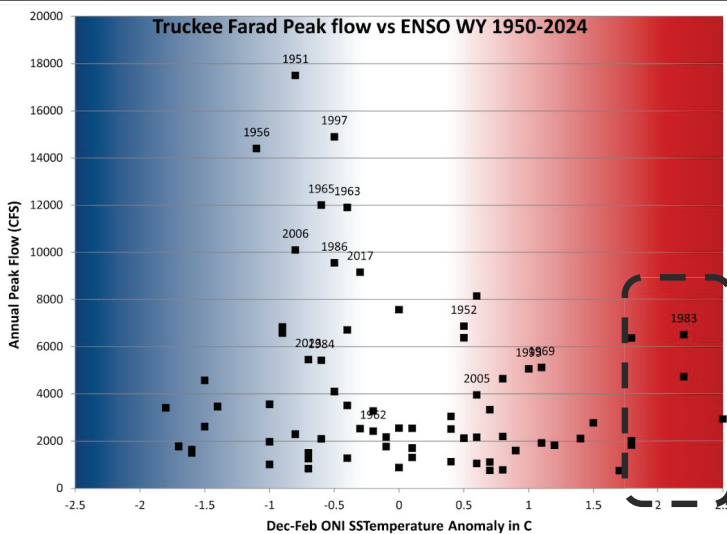


Note: This is using ONI and not RONI for Strong vs Very Strong definitions. Very strong highlighted in Red.

NOTE: Years are Water Years (Oct 1 - Sept 30). Example: Winter 2022/2023 is Water Year 2023



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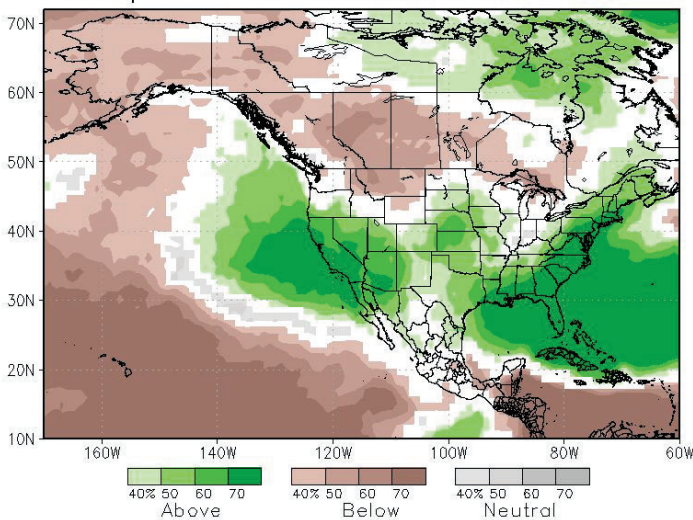
Historically lesser flood risk in Moderate to Strong El Niño years, but that doesn't mean it can't happen.

Note the Great Flood of 1997 was NOT the same WY as the 1997-98 El Niño!

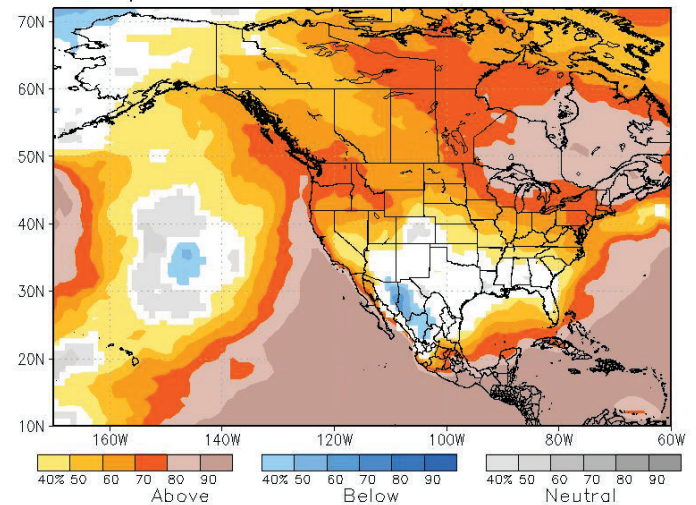
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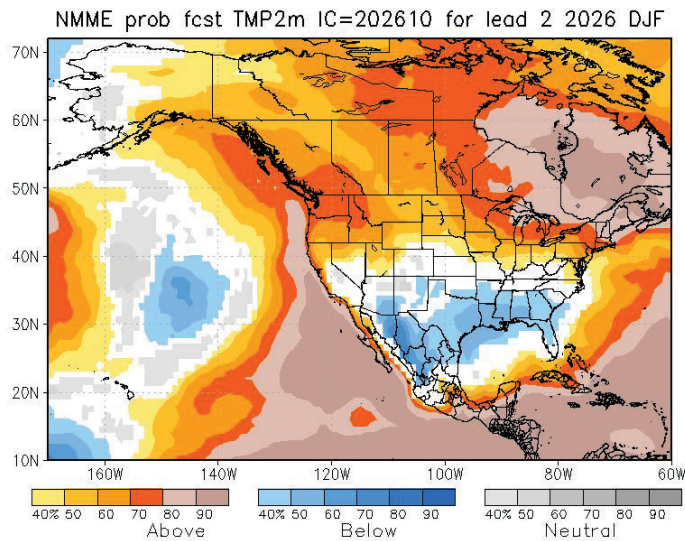
NMME prob fcst Prate IC=202610 for lead 1 2026 NDJ



NMME prob fcst TMP2m IC=202610 for lead 1 2026 NDJ

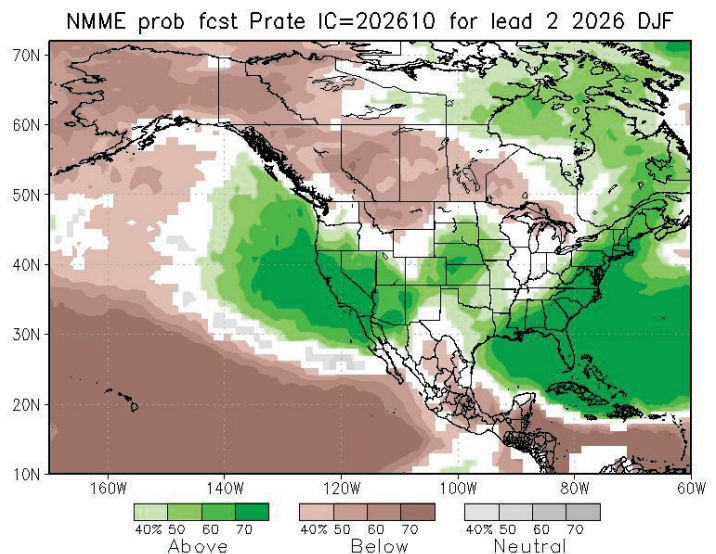


- 100% of climate ensembles lean wetter, 57% (4 of 7) lean warmer
- Remember: This is general trends, not storm to storm variability!

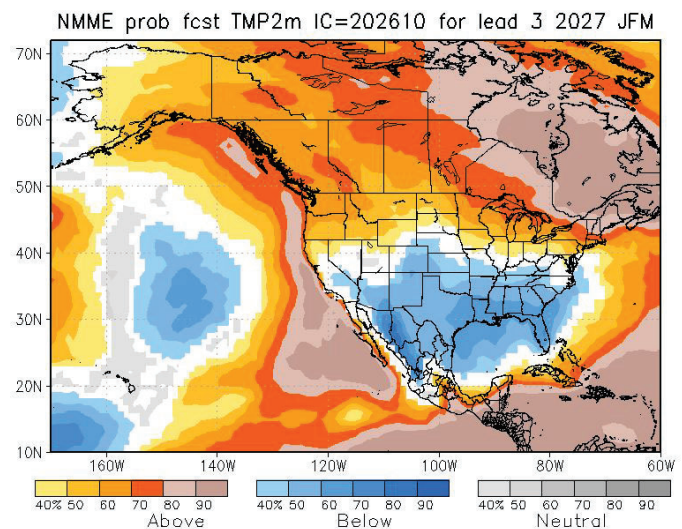
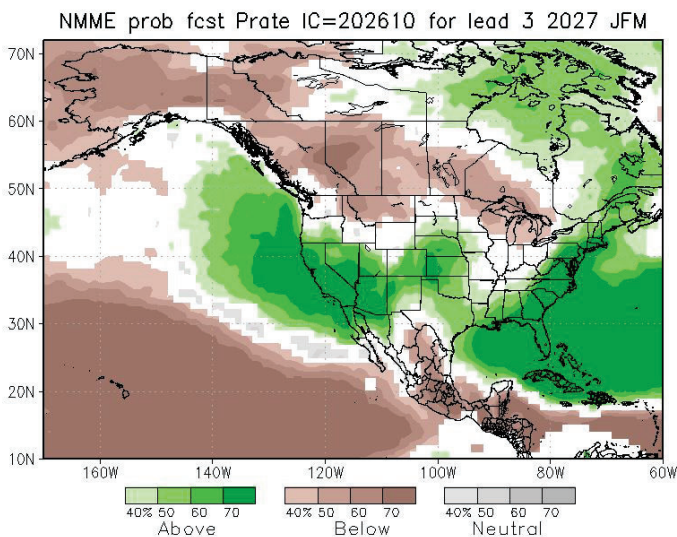


Temperatures more of a mixed bag, slight lean warmer to the north, otherwise, no favored outcome.

At this point 7/7 climate models lean wet (and in a big way) for winter



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- 100% of climate ensembles still lean wet
- No favored outcome with temps (3/7 colder, 3/7 warmer, 1/7 neutral)

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ECMWF Seasonal Forecasts

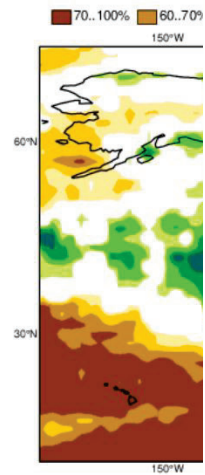
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ECMWF Seasonal Forecast

Prob(most likely category of precipitation)

Forecast start is 01/10/26, climate period is 1993-2016

Ensemble size = 51, climate size = 600

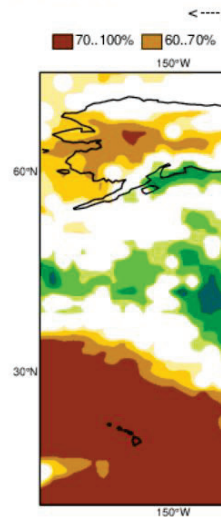


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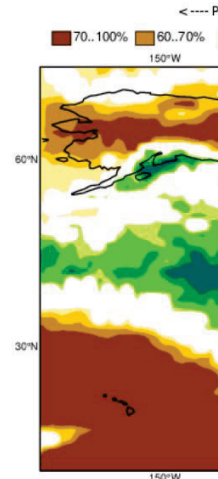


ECMWF Seasonal Forecast

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System 5
NDJ 2026/27

System 5
DJF 2026/27

System 5
JFM 2027

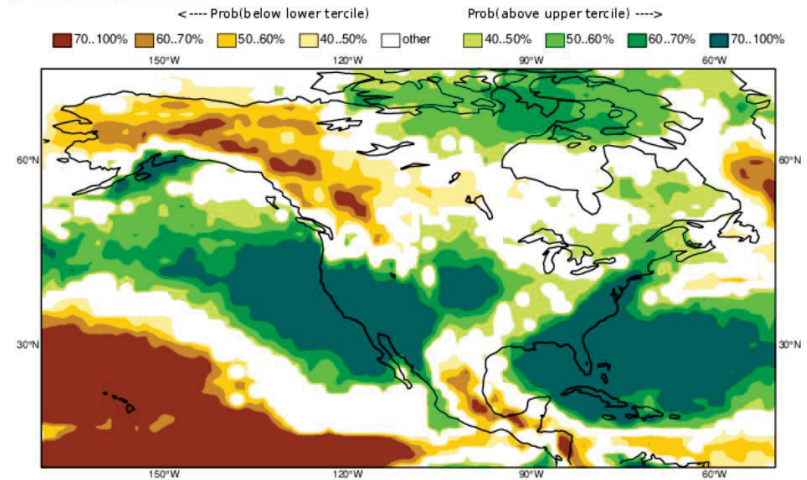
System 5
FMA 2027

ECMWF Seasonal Forecast

Prob(most likely category of precipitation)

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Ensemble size = 51, climate size = 600



Starts with 50-70% odds for above normal precip, then increases to 70-100% odds for above normal.

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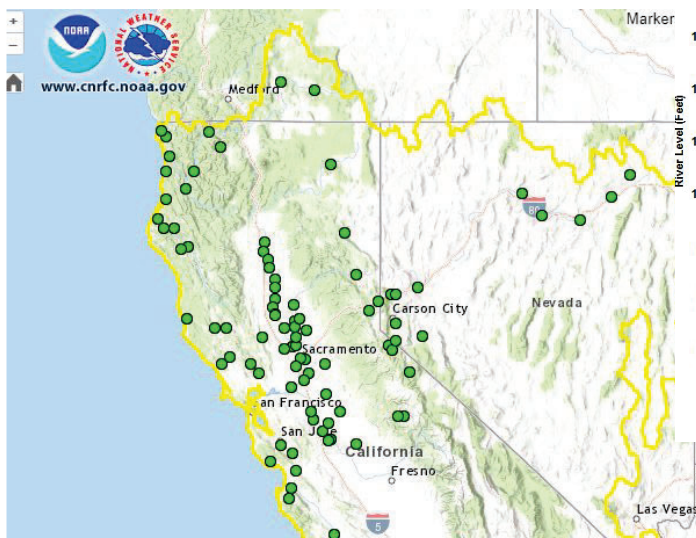


California-Nevada River Forecast Center

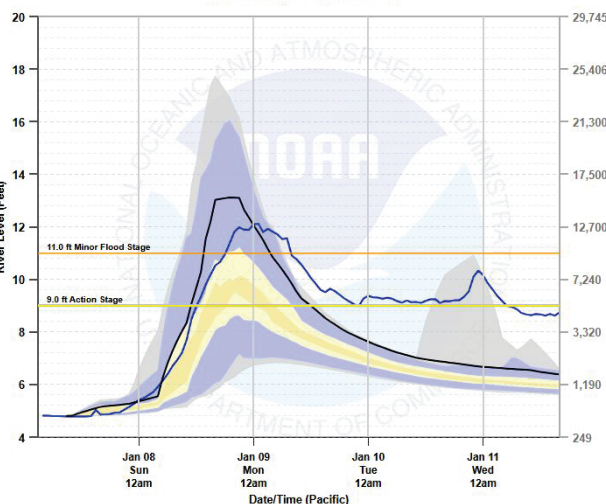
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California-Nevada River Forecast Center (CNRFC)

provides excellent overview for river conditions and forecasts for points throughout the state.



Hourly Peak River Level Probabilities
TRUCKEE RIVER - RENO (TRRN2)
Created: 1/7/2017 at 9:00 AM Pacific Time



Chance of River Level Exceedance (Feet)	
Forecast Period: 01/07/2017 4am - 01/11/2017 4pm	
Max	17.73
5%	16.26
10%	14.04
25%	11.58
50%	9.92
75%	8.94
90%	7.87
95%	7.42
Min	6.84
Minor Flood 11.0 ft 32%	
9.0 ft Action	
7.240	
3,320	
1,190	
249	
Customize Thresholds	
Show: 5 Days 10 Days	
Export Image	
Export Chart Data (CSV)	
Scale To Threshold(s)	
☒ Observed	
☒ Official Forecast (Deterministic)	
☐ Ensemble Mean	
☐ Model Traces	
☒ Hourly Probabilities	
☐ 0-5% chance	
☐ 5-25% chance	
☐ 25-40% chance	
☐ 40-60% chance	



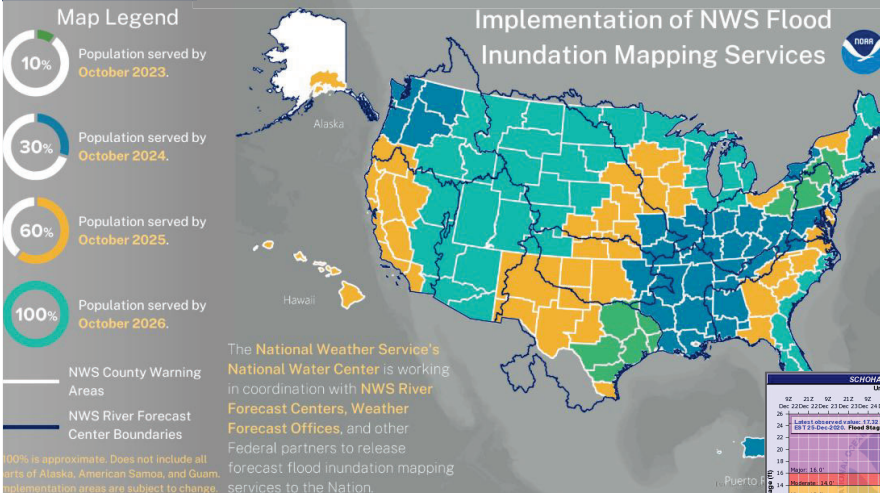
<https://www.cnrfc.noaa.gov/>

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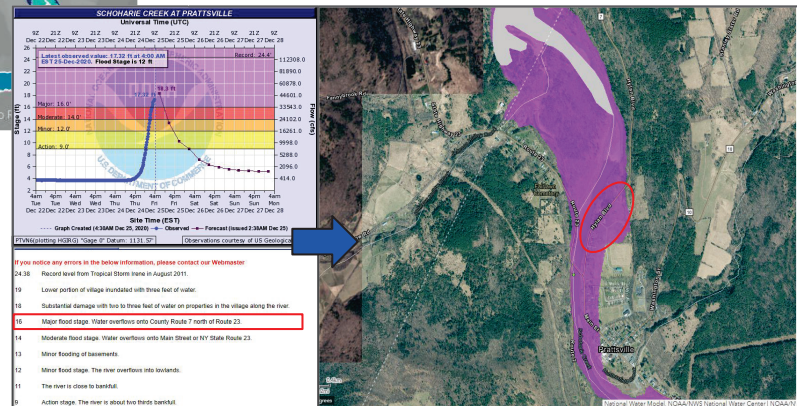
NWS Flood Inundation Services

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Did you catch the webinar? If not we have it recorded and can share.

Putting Water on a Map



Now publicly available for all of Conus. Modeling Skill is still lacking in our Region, but undergoing continuous development. Enormous future potential, but not yet ready for decision making in the semi-arid west.



Knowns & Unknowns

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Knowns:

- El Niño is already here and has a high (<90%) likelihood of being very strong.
- This tends to favor wetter conditions in Srn CA/NV, lesser predictability Nrn CA/NV.

Unknowns:

- How many atmospheric rivers (ARs) will impact CA/NV.
- The strength of these ARs.
- How much Sierra spillover?
- Will it rain or snow "X" inches at a specific location & Snow Level.

→ These are not reliably predictable on a seasonal--level; information becomes more apparent in the weather forecast (5-14 days out). The signals are there for a potentially big winter, though not a guarantee.

El Niño Shifting Actions Timeline

Seasonal Outlooks

KNOW



Know how El Niño can change weather risks in your area.



Know your home insurance policies. Flood insurance is often a separate policy.

Monthly Outlooks

PREPARE



Prepare your home by clearing brush and debris from drains and gutters.



Obtain/check flood remediation items such as sandbags and pumps.

Weekly Outlooks

REVIEW



Review the contents of your emergency supply kit. Replenish any medicine or other items as needed.



Review your family communication plan.

Weather Outlooks

ACT!



Be ready to act in the days ahead of forecasted hazards.

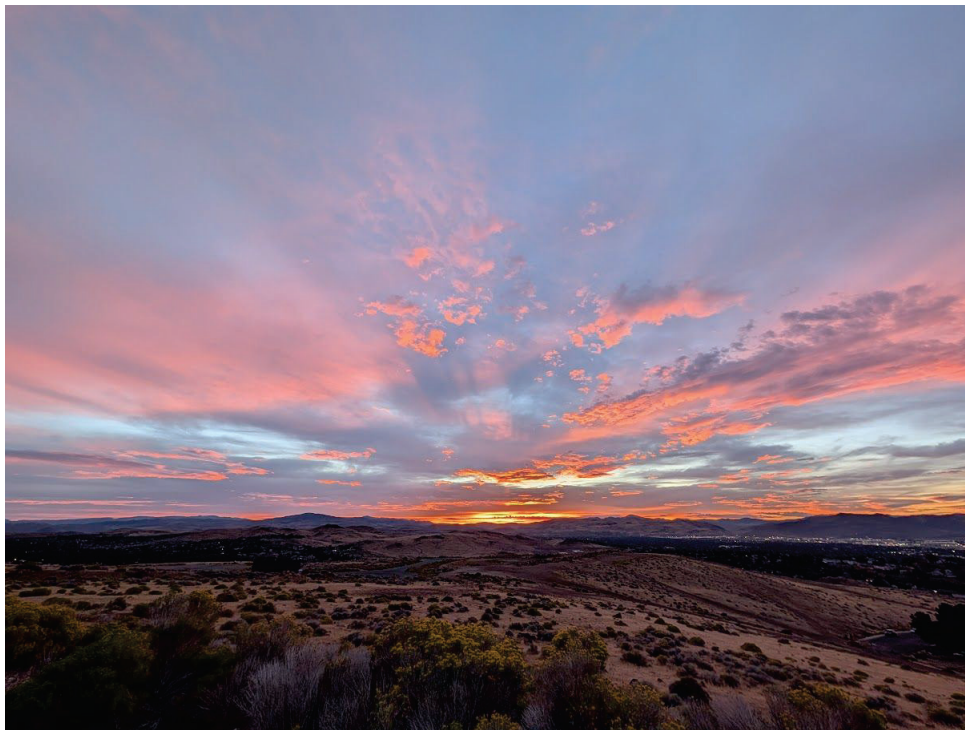
This could include securing loose outdoor items, deploying sandbags, or even preparing for evacuation.

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That's a Wrap. May the Odds Ever Be in Our Favor...

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Wildfire increases
the potential for
runoff and erosion

Loss of Interception



Reduces soil
infiltration capacity



Makes soil more
easy to erode

Slide courtesy of Dennis Staley USGS