

# Likely Super El Niño will intensify climate change

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Recent satellite data has revealed a large swell of unusually warm water, hundreds of miles wide, has developed in the Pacific Ocean off the west coast of South America. In the past, such a development heralds the emergence of a weather phenomenon known as El Niño. That is Spanish for “little boy” a reference to the Christ Child since it usually begins to peak in December. This alternates with a cooling cycle known as La Niña.

Normally, Pacific Ocean trade winds blow west along the equator, taking warm water from South America towards Asia. To replace that warm water, cold water rises from the depths—a process called upwelling. El Niño and La Niña are two opposing climate patterns that break these normal conditions. Scientists call these phenomena the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) cycle. El Niños occur when these trade winds weaken. Warm water is pushed back east, toward the west coast of the Americas.

Warmer sea surface temperatures affect atmospheric circulation patterns including the jet stream, disrupting storm tracks. El Niños can result in weather extremes of high and low precipitation and elevated atmospheric temperatures over much of the globe, depending on the intensity in any given year. It increases the potential for drought in South and Southeast Asia, Northeastern South America, Australia and Southern Africa. Other areas experience greater rainfall. In either case, normal weather patterns are disrupted with often severe consequences.

Typically, El Niños develop at irregular intervals every two to seven years. Some are especially intense. These are known as Super El Niños. Due to global warming increasing ocean temperatures, the US National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) Climate Prediction Center

anticipates that this cycle will be especially strong. It “is likely to emerge soon (82% chance in May-July 2026) and continue through Northern Hemisphere winter 2026-27 (96% chance in December 2026-February 2027).”

Some models predict Pacific sea surface temperatures will rise more than 7.2 degrees Fahrenheit (4 degrees Celsius) above average by the fall, suggesting this El Niño could be the strongest on record, with potentially catastrophic results. For comparison, during the El Niño of 1877, Pacific sea surface temperatures rose approximately 6.3 degrees F (3.5 degrees C) above average at their peak. That resulted in persistent, severe droughts in Asia, Brazil and Africa, leading to widespread crop failure and a global famine that killed more than 50 million people. India was especially hard hit. The resulting mass starvation was compounded by the British colonial administration which prioritized huge grain exports over the needs of the Indian population.

The last Super El Niño, spanning 2015-2016, which caused drought in Africa and flooding in California, ultimately cost the global economy \$3.9 trillion.

As a consequence of the very strong El Niño during 1997-98, China experienced its worst flooding in nearly half a century. Two months of heavy rain caused approximately 3,000 deaths.

The strong El Niño that developed in 2023 was instrumental in making 2024 the hottest year on record to date. In April-May 2024, unprecedented floods in Rio Grande do Sul, a state in Southern Brazil, displaced around 600,000 people and caused more than 180 deaths.

The heatwave currently blanketing Europe could be compounded by a developing Super El Niño. Some scientists suggest that as the planet continues to warm,

Super El Niños will become more frequent and may initiate a self-reinforcing positive-feedback loop which would significantly accelerate global warming, with all of its negative consequences.

The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction has projected that the current El Niño will likely lead to asymmetric impacts, with drought conditions reducing corn, rice and wheat production across Asia and Australia while enhanced precipitation boosts soybean production in the Americas. This will coincide with major conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, multiple rapidly spreading diseases (measles, Ebola and new COVID mutant strains) along with the intensifying global capitalist economic crisis. The compound effects are potentially catastrophic.

While many factors can influence the characteristics of weather across the globe in any particular year, the accelerating trend of anthropogenic global warming is clear. The consequent rise in ocean temperatures is well documented. Given the current understanding of the mechanisms that drive the El Niño weather phenomenon, it is all but certain that its destructive effects will be amplified in coming years.

A foretaste of what is in store, dubbed “El Niño Costero de 2026,” is already happening in Peru. As reported in the *World Socialist Web Site* in March:

Peru is reeling from an intense wave of heat, torrential rains, landslides and river floods that have already claimed 68 lives and affected nearly 200,000 people in barely three months. While families dig through mud and debris for survivors, the country’s Congress debates anything but the crisis. The disaster has exposed once again how a corrupt ruling oligarchy and its political representatives are unable and unwilling to protect the lives and welfare of the masses of Peruvian working people.

The capitalist ruling classes, focused as they are on war and the suppression of the working class, have done nothing to ameliorate global warming and are totally unprepared to cope with the potential catastrophe of a likely Super El Niño.



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