



August 2026: Southwest Climate Outlook



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Stacie Reece

August 28, 2026

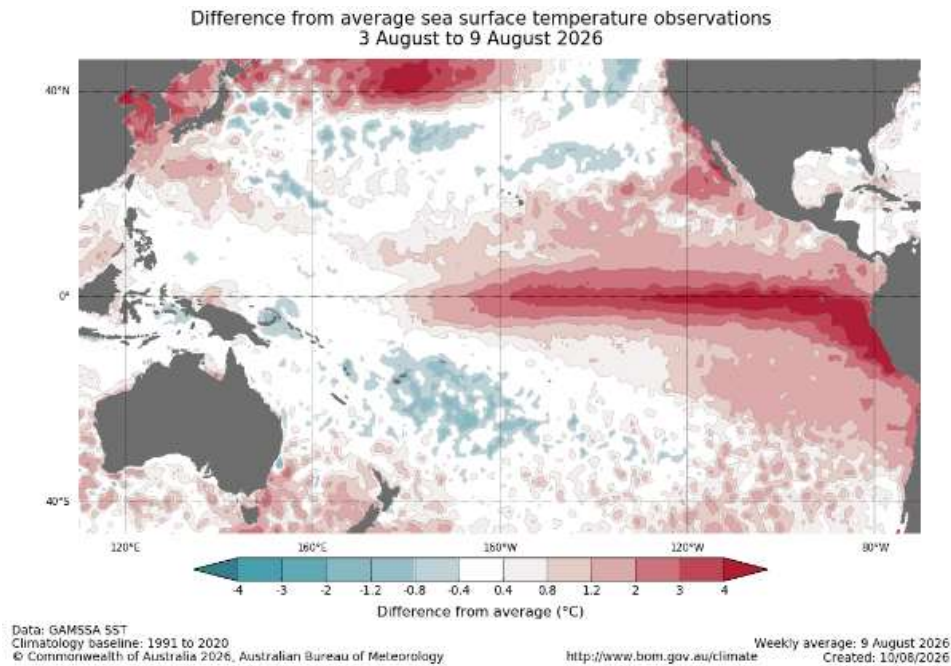


<https://climas.arizona.edu/>

The Southwest Climate Outlook is published by the Climate Assessment for the Southwest (CLIMAS), with support from University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, and the New Mexico State Climate office.

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El Niño Highlight



Source: Australian Bureau of Meteorology.

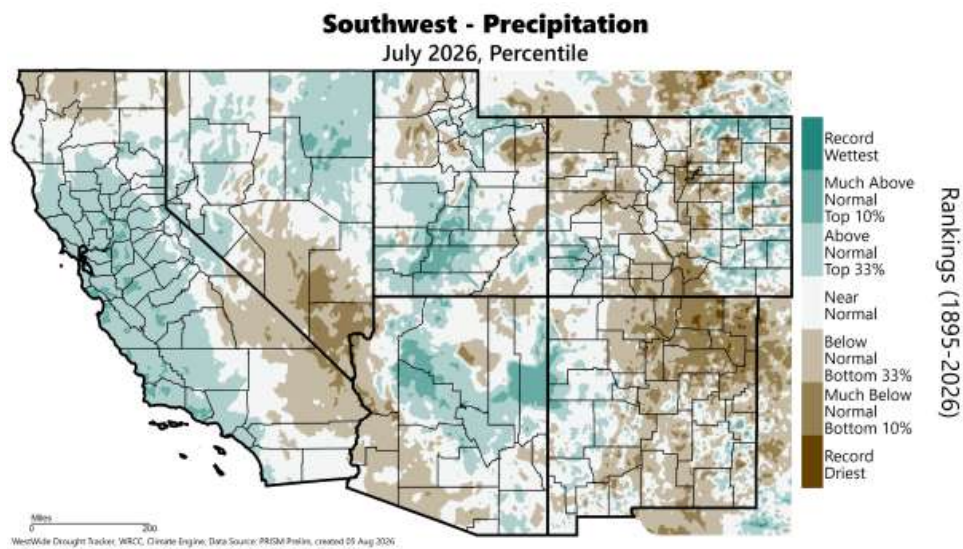
El Niño conditions in the Pacific are strengthening, expected to continue to strengthen into fall, and persist through winter before weakening by spring 2027.

- For seasonal climate in the Southwest, this means increased chances of above-normal precipitation, fall–spring.
- Recent sea surface temperature observations indicate that El Niño conditions are just shy of the threshold criteria for a Very Strong El Niño, the highest category of El Niño strength. This has only happened 4 times in the past 50 years—in 2015–2016, 1997–1998, 1991–1992, and 1982–1983.
- A stronger El Niño does not necessarily translate to greater impacts on seasonal climate in the Southwest, but it does lend increased confidence to the forecast of a general tendency toward wetter-than-normal conditions.
- In the near term, enhanced tropical cyclone activity in the East Pacific could act as a source of atmospheric moisture during the monsoon–fall transition.

See more in [ENSO Tracker](#)

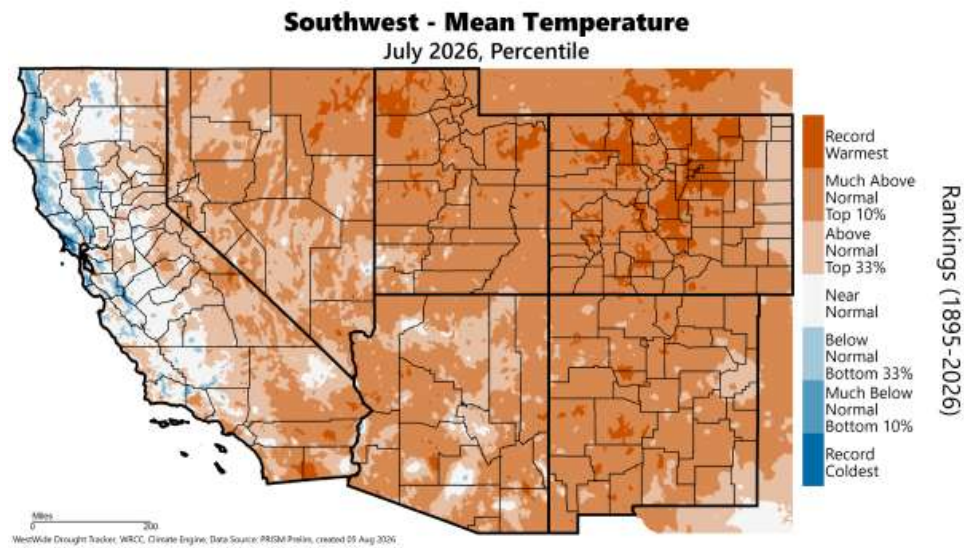
Precipitation and Temperature

July precipitation totals varied across the region, from much-above normal totals in parts of northern Arizona, to much-below normal totals in parts of northern New Mexico. It was the driest July on record for some locations in northeastern New Mexico.



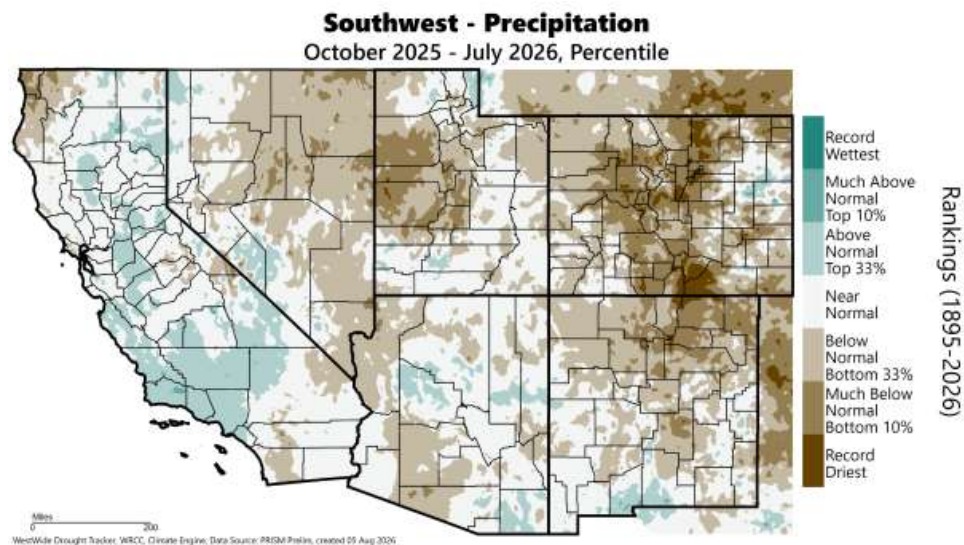
Source: [WestWide Drought Tracker](#)

July temperatures averaged much-above normal for most areas of Arizona and New Mexico, meaning the July average temperature ranked among the top 10% of July-average temperatures across all years on record. It was the warmest July on record for some locations, including along the Rio Grande in parts of Bernalillo and Socorro counties, New Mexico.



Source: [WestWide Drought Tracker](#)

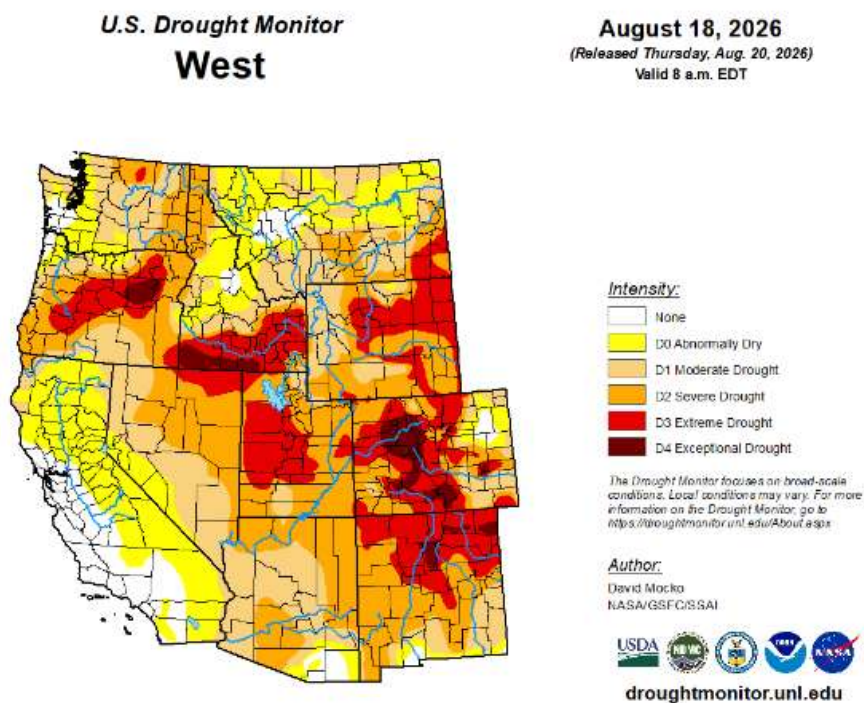
Precipitation totals for the Water Year so far (October 2025–July 2026) are below normal for much of New Mexico and parts of Arizona. For some locations in northern New Mexico, it has been the driest October–July on record. Areas where water year totals are above normal include parts of Doña Ana and Otero counties in New Mexico, and parts of Cochise and Yavapai counties in Arizona.



Source: [WestWide Drought Tracker](#)

Drought

Drought conditions classified as Moderate (D1) or worse are affecting areas amounting to 89% of Arizona and 94% of New Mexico. Those figures are about the same as they were a month ago, but some areas of Arizona have seen downgrades of drought intensity while parts of New Mexico have seen intensification of drought conditions. Northern New Mexico is affected by the most intense drought conditions in the region, where more than one-third of the state's area is classified under Extreme (D3) drought, which corresponds to conditions seen, historically, once in 20–50 years, on average. Some areas, including Santa Fe County, are classified under Exceptional (D4) drought—conditions occurring once in 50–100 years, historically.



[Source: U.S. Drought Monitor](#)

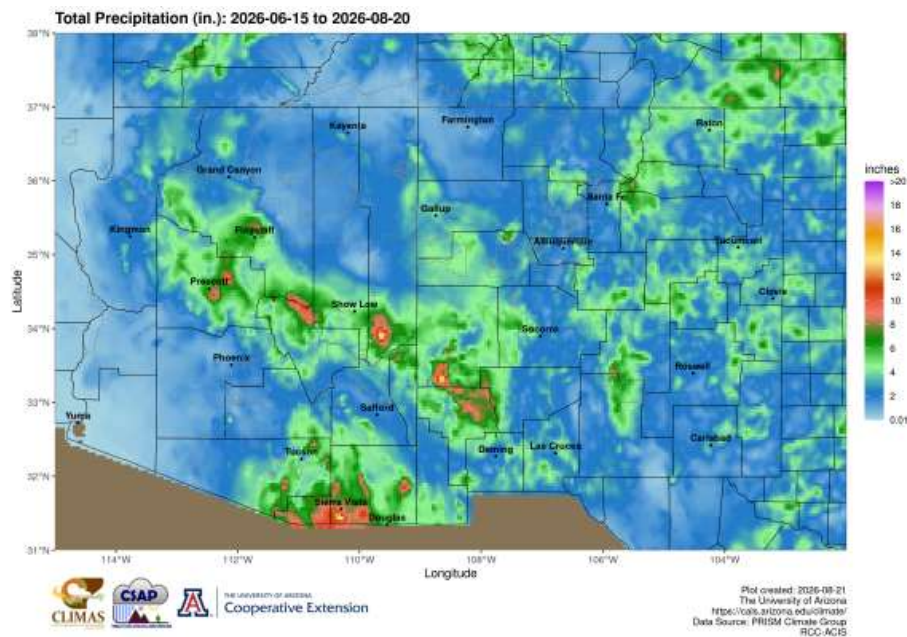
NIDIS Improved and Expanded State Pages on Drought.Gov

New Mexico

Arizona

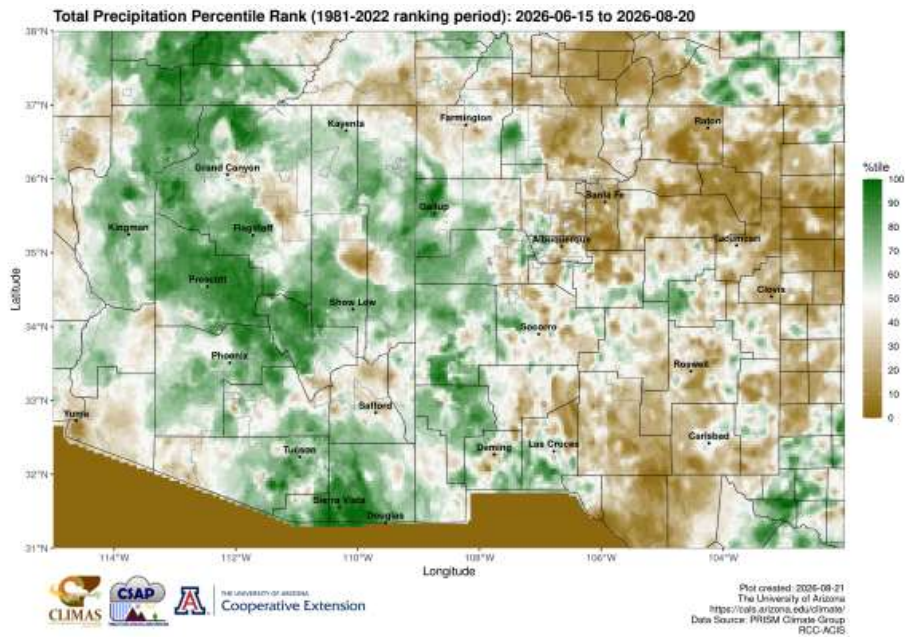
Monsoon

Precipitation totals for the monsoon season so far (starting June 15) range from totals near zero around Yuma, AZ, to over 12 inches in some high-elevation locations along the Mogollon Rim and the mountains of southeastern Arizona. This general pattern is typical for the monsoon because high elevations favor convective storm activity, and areas at the southern extreme of Arizona and New Mexico see more frequent waves of atmospheric moisture from the core of monsoon activity in Mexico.



Source: University of Arizona Cooperative Extension - CSAP

Compared to past years, this year's totals are above normal for much of Arizona and western New Mexico, but generally below normal for areas of New Mexico from the Rio Grande and to the east.



Source: [University of Arizona Cooperative Extension - CSAP](#)

Water Supply

Reservoir storage in Arizona is generally below normal levels for this time of year and down compared to last year, although Verde River reservoirs are near normal. San Carlos reservoir remains near empty from the compounding effects of long-term drought and last fall–spring's very warm, dry conditions in the Gila River headwaters.

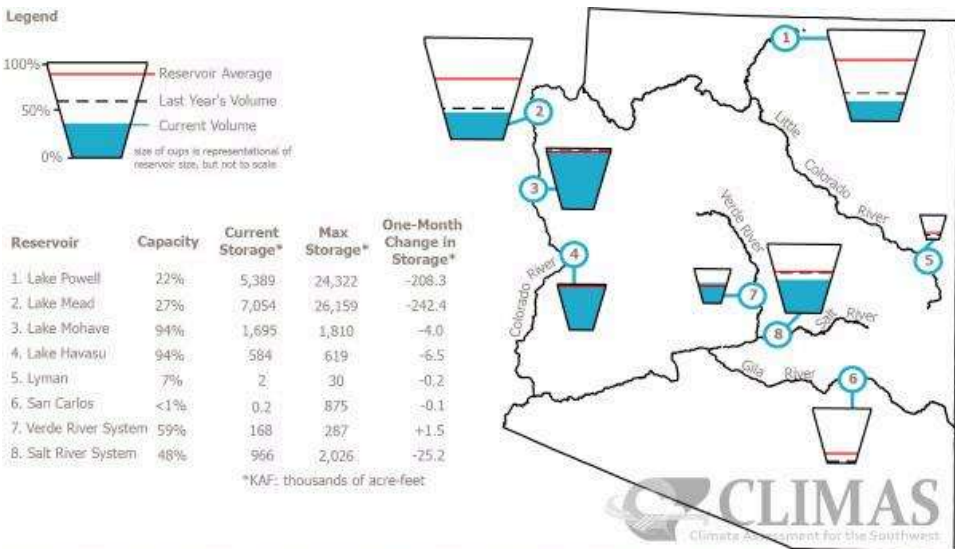


Figure 1: Arizona reservoir volumes for the end of July 2026 as a percent of capacity. The map depicts the average volume and last year's storage for each reservoir. The table also lists current and maximum storage, and change in storage since last month.

Reservoir storage in New Mexico is generally below normal for this time of year and down compared to last year, with only a few exceptions. Just three reservoirs saw net increases in July—Lake Avalon, Sumner Reservoir, and Costilla Reservoir.

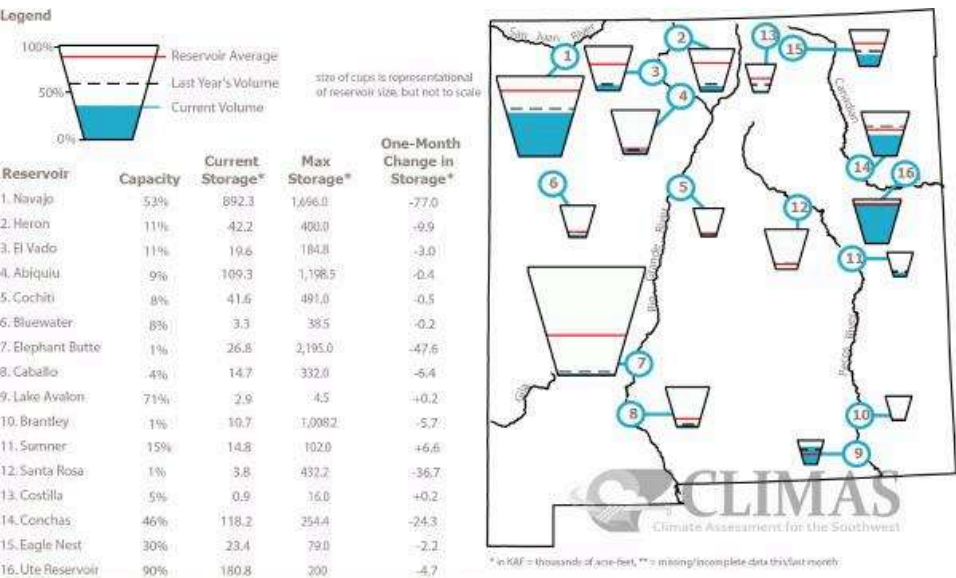


Figure 2. New Mexico reservoir volumes for end of July 2026 as a percent of capacity. The map depicts the average volume and last year's storage for each reservoir. The table also lists current and maximum storage, and change in storage since last month.

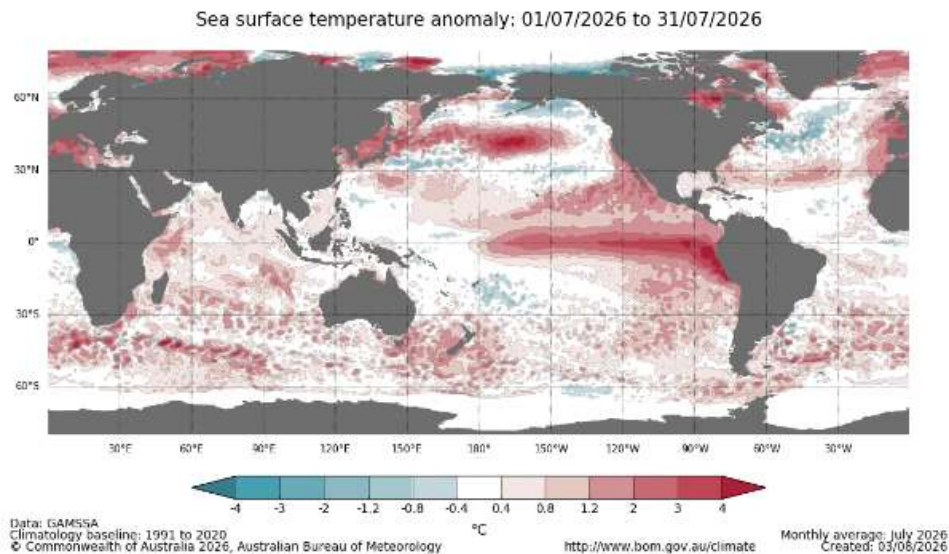
The map gives a representation of current storage for reservoirs in Arizona and New Mexico. Reservoir locations are numbered within the blue circles on the map, corresponding to the reservoirs listed in the table. The cup next to each reservoir shows the current storage (blue fill) as a percent of total capacity. Note that while the size of each cup varies with the size of the reservoir, these are representational and not to scale. Each cup also represents last year's storage (dotted line) and the 1991–2020 reservoir average (red line). The table details more exactly the current capacity (listed as a percent of maximum storage). Current and maximum storage are given in thousands of acre-feet for each reservoir. One acre-foot is the volume of water sufficient to cover an acre of land to a depth of 1 foot (approximately 325,851 gallons). On average, 1 acre-foot of water is enough to meet the demands of four people for a year. The last column of the table lists an increase or decrease in storage since last month. A line indicates no change. These data are based on reservoir reports updated monthly by the Natural

[Resources Conservation Service - National Water and Climate Center \(USDA\)](#)

BOR: New Mexico Dashboard

ENSO Tracker

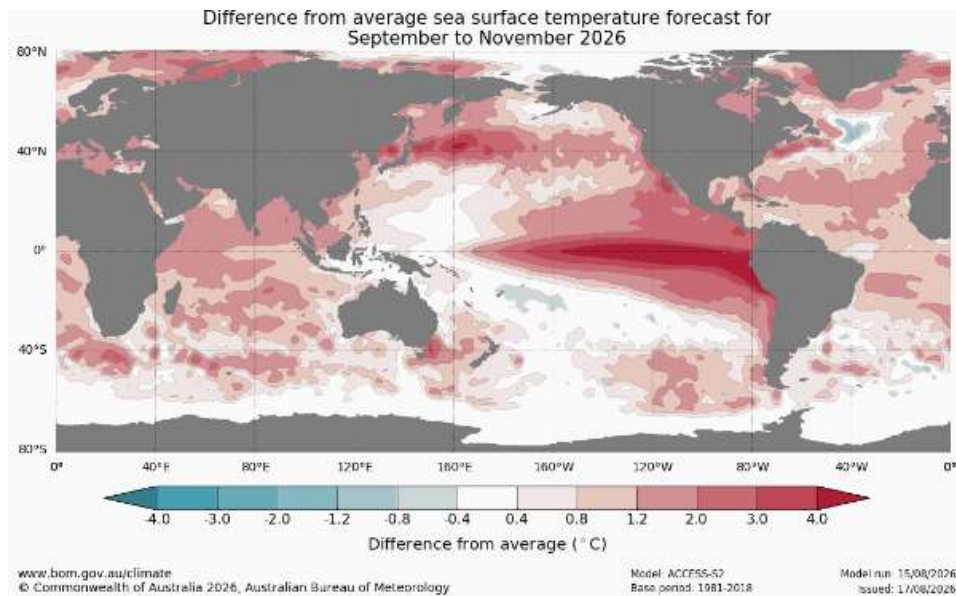
July average sea-surface temperature (SST) anomalies (departure from average) show El Niño conditions in full swing, with warm SST anomalies extending across the central–eastern equatorial Pacific, from the international date line to the western coast of South America. Anomalously warm SSTs have also been persisting in the East Pacific, between Hawaii and Mexico, lending additional energy to East Pacific tropical cyclones that are favored under El Niño conditions.



[Source: Australian Bureau of Meteorology](#)

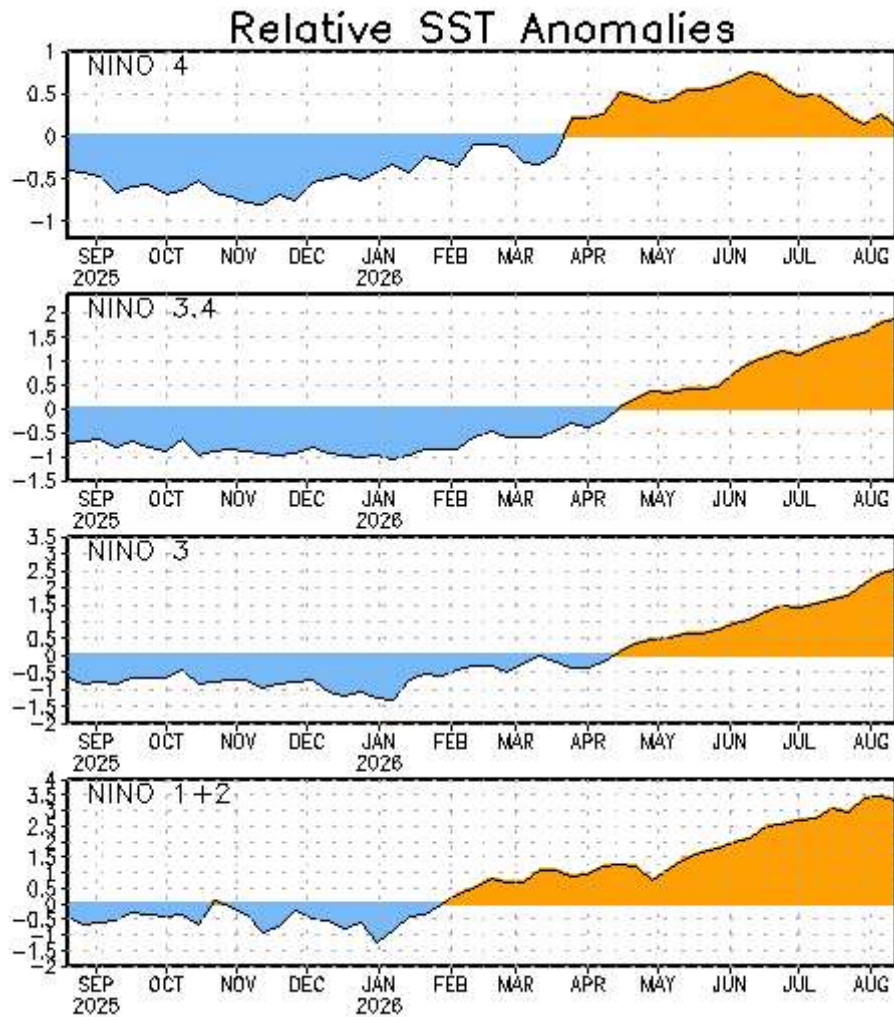
The September–November SST forecast from the Australian ACCESS model shows the El Niño signature strengthening, with warmer SST anomalies, and shows the East Pacific warm

anomalies persisting into the fall, through the latter part of the Hurricane season.



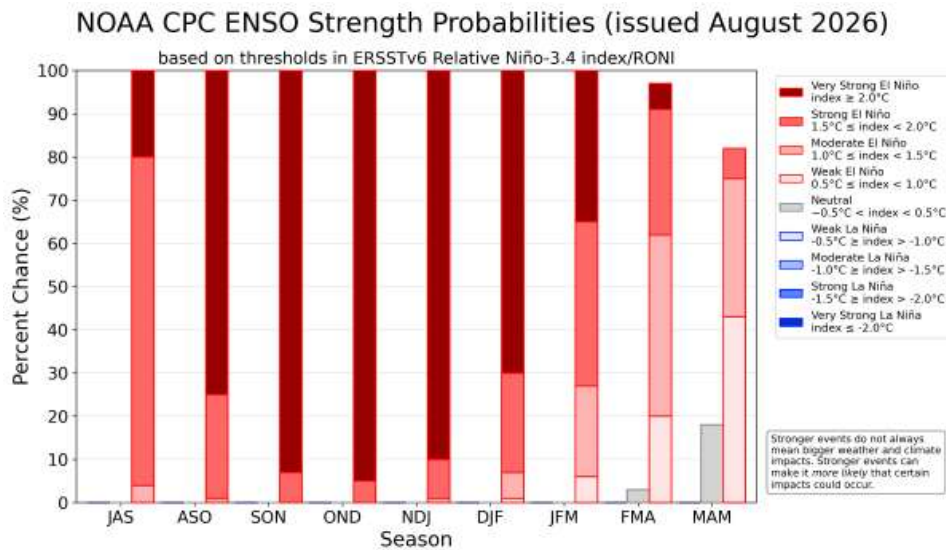
[Source: Australian Bureau of Meteorology.](#)

Weekly SST anomalies within the ENSO monitoring regions show steady increases over the past months in all regions except Nino 4, the westernmost region, in the central equatorial Pacific. Nino 3.4 SSTs, which are used to diagnose the status and strength of El Niño, most recently measured at just under 2°C warmer than average—well past the 1.5°C threshold criteria for a *Strong* El Niño, an on track to cross the 2°C threshold criteria for a *Very Strong* El Niño, the highest strength category.



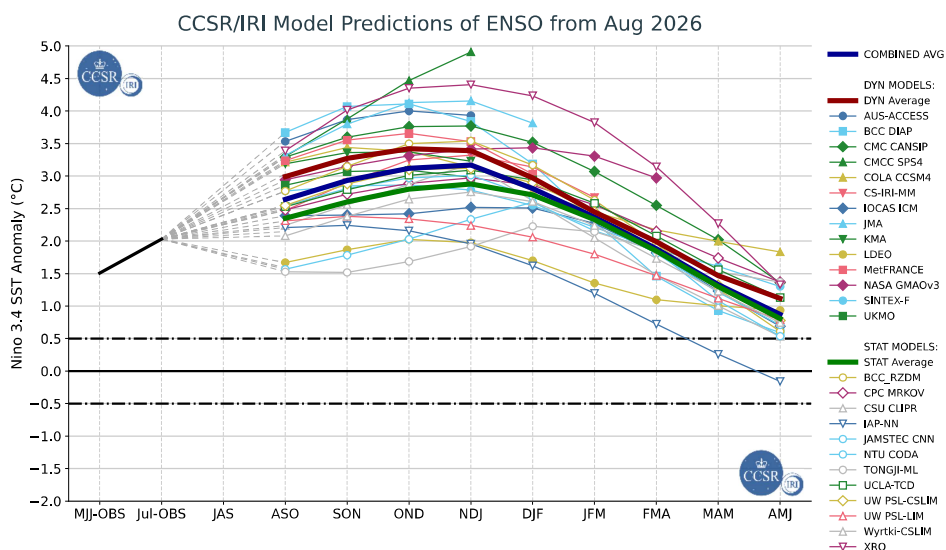
Source: NOAA Climate Prediction Center - ENSO

Model-based forecasts are in unanimous agreement that El Niño conditions will persist through the winter. Forecasts indicate chances over 90% of conditions strengthening to a *Very Strong* El Niño, the highest category of El Niño strength. By the March–May forecast window (MAM), El Niño conditions are likely to still be in place (>80% chance), but strength is expected to have declined, most likely to a *Weak* El Niño, the lowermost category of El Niño strength.



Source: NOAA Climate Prediction Center - ENSO

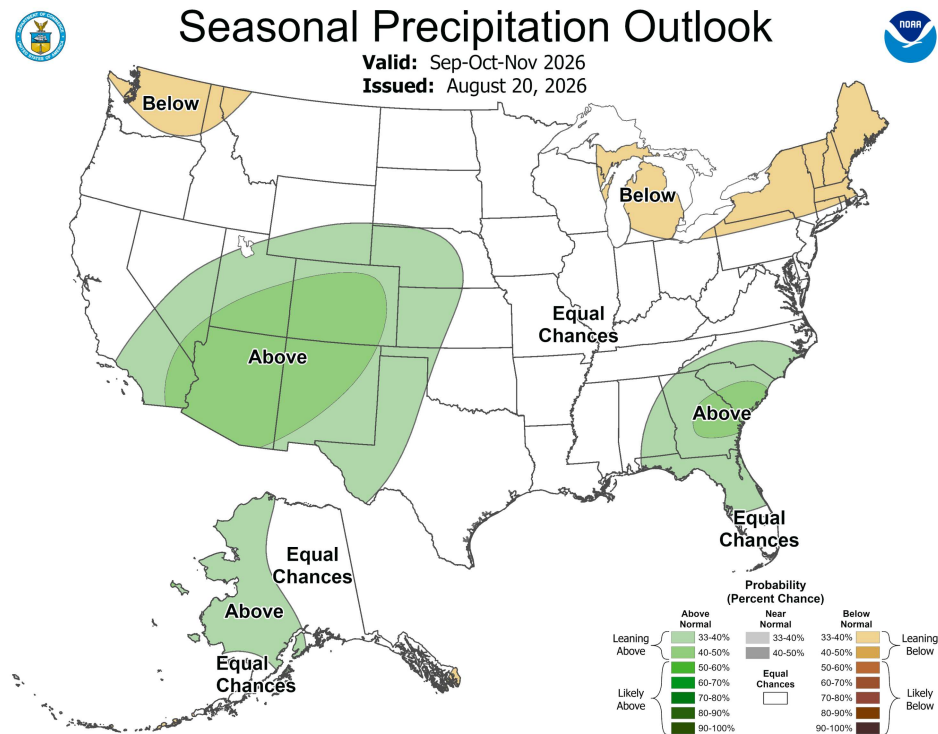
The plume plot shows the range of forecast trajectories of individual models, starting from the July Niño 3.4 SST anomaly near 2°C (Jul-OBS on the chart). By the November–January forecast window, almost all models predict Niño 3.4 SST anomalies greater than 2°C—*Very Strong* El Niño conditions. Models at the upper end of the range of strength predictions indicate Niño 3.4 SST anomalies over 4°C—two times the departure that qualifies as *Very Strong*, the highest category of El Niño strength.



Source: The International Research Institute for Climate and Society, Columbia University Climate School

Seasonal Forecasts

The September–November seasonal precipitation forecast has chances leaning toward above normal precipitation for Arizona and New Mexico—meaning 33–50% chance probabilities that 3-month precipitation totals will end up ranking among the upper one-third of past years on record.



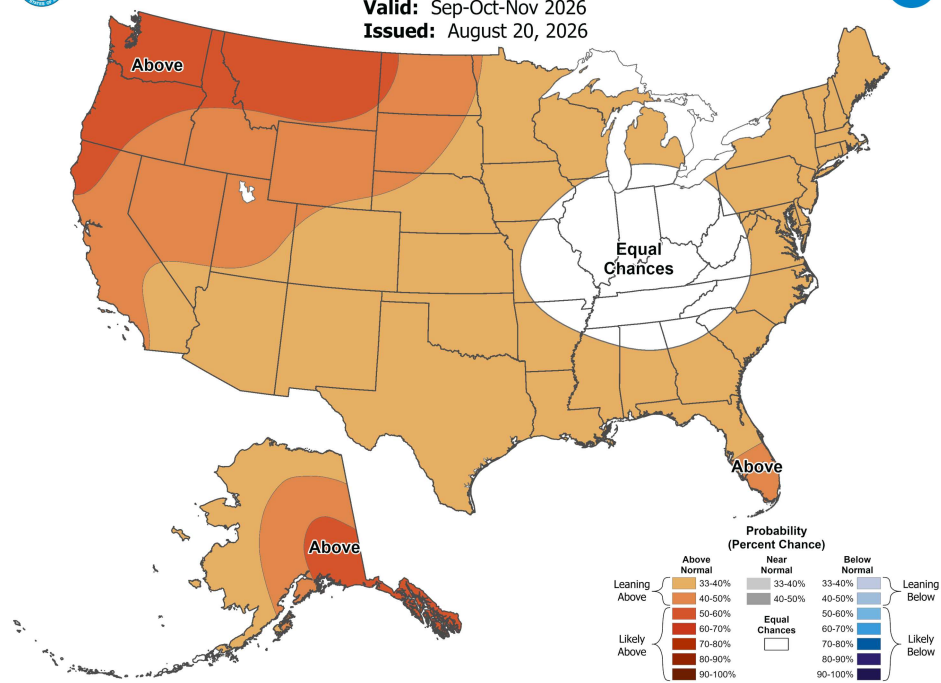
[Source: Climate Prediction Center \(NOAA\)](#)

The September–November seasonal temperature forecast has chances leaning toward above normal temperatures for Arizona and New Mexico—33–40% chance probabilities that 3-month average temperatures will end up ranking among the upper one-third of past years on record.



Seasonal Temperature Outlook

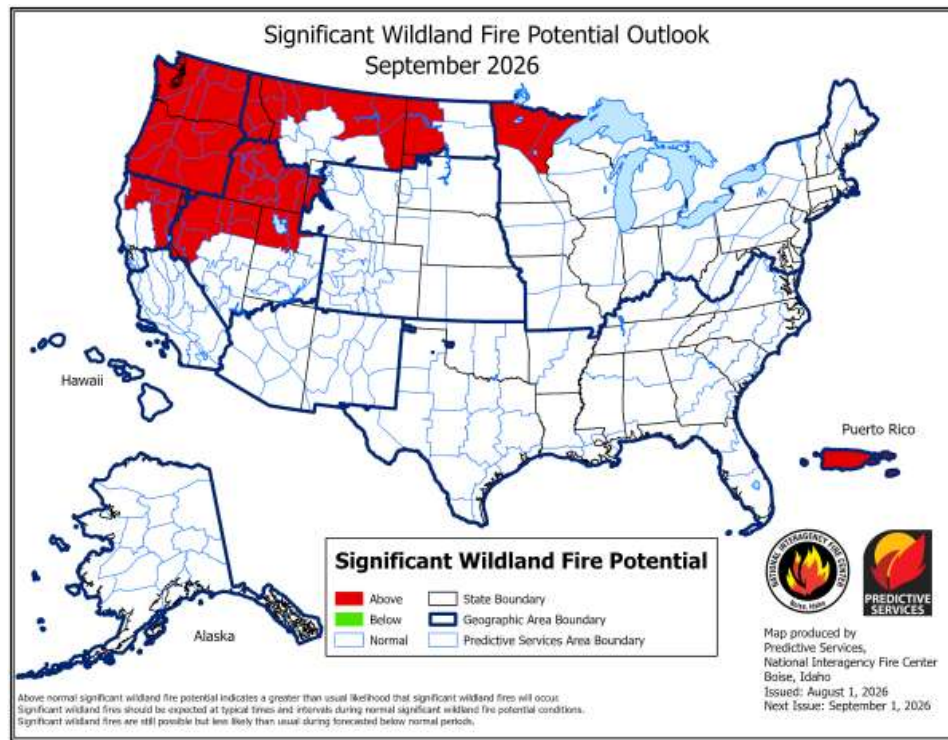
Valid: Sep-Oct-Nov 2026
Issued: August 20, 2026



Source: [Climate Prediction Center \(NOAA\)](https://climatepredictioncenter.noaa.gov/)

Wildfire

Potential for significant wildland fire in September is expected to be normal for this time of year, across Arizona and New Mexico.



[Source: National Interagency Coordination Center](#)

Public Health Corner

Welcome to the Public Health Corner, a quarterly section in the Southwest Climate Outlook dedicated to exploring the intersection between climate change and public health in Arizona and New Mexico! In the Public Health Corner, we dive into the various ways climate influences our SW communities' health and explore strategies to mitigate and adapt to these challenges.

This summer 2026 is another record-breaking one, with the earliest start to the heat season on record for Phoenix, and over 11 extreme heat warning days higher than average (as of August 3, 2026). With the continuing intensification of extreme heat, this quarter we focus on heat's health impacts.

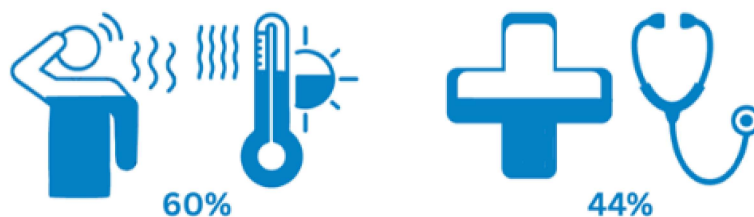
While extreme heat planning often focuses on urban areas, rural areas and small communities are still greatly affected by extreme heat. CLIMAS post-doc Anne-Lise Boyer led a

systematic review showing these disparities in extreme heat vulnerability, finding that rural areas have greater vulnerable populations (e.g. outdoor workers, elderly) experiencing heat-related illness, along with reduced infrastructure and resources to address extreme heat risk. [This review](#) underscores the need for integrated, place-based governance frameworks that respond to the specific conditions of rural communities. CLIMAS PI Ladd Keith, and post-docs Boyer and Minwoo Ahn [address this gap in planning](#) through outlining strategies for heat mitigation and management tailored for the rural and small-town context. Published with the American Planning Association, their memo adapts and expands urban-focused heat-resilience planning into a rural framework centered on setting goals, building a local heat-data “fact base,” choosing feasible actions, coordinating across plans and agencies, engaging residents, and monitoring results. Recommended actions combine mitigation efforts like shade at schools and work sites, conserving vegetation, weatherizing homes, and reducing waste heat. While management strategies such as reliable affordable cooling, worker protections, trusted heat warnings, health outreach, and accessible or mobile cooling centers help support greater public health.

Building on this work for New Mexico, post-doc Minwoo Ahn was invited to present at the Building Heat-Ready Communities Symposium and Extreme Heat Mass Casualty Incident Drill at Gallup Indian Medical Center on June 1, 2026. The first part of the event was online, but the onsite event convened health-care professionals, emergency responders, Tribal partners, and community stakeholders to strengthen heat-emergency preparedness in Indigenous and rural communities. In Arizona, Anne-Lise Boyer also participated in the state’s April 3 extreme-heat tabletop exercise in Phoenix to consider compounding and cascading scenarios in cities and rural areas.

In the meantime, urban heat strategies still include knowing where your cooling centers are and how to access them. Tucson alone has over 30 facilities which provide temporary cooling in the summer. So far nearly 50,000 people have taken advantage of the benefit of these facilities. In our evaluation of 2025 cooling center visitors conducted by CLIMAS PI Heidi Brown, our BRACE intern, and the Pima County Health Department, approximately half of visitors completing the survey were first time visitors and reached the cooling center using public transportation. Just under a quarter of cooling center visitors were there because of problems with their AC, serving as a reminder to map out your nearest cooling center just in case the power goes out or your AC gives up. Acting fast saves lives – 60% of cooling center visitors reported experiencing HRI symptoms and 44% sought medical care because of it. Stay heat aware by receiving text alerts from the NWS for extreme heat events and other weather hazards, utilizing your phone's weather app, and using 211 to access resources during an extreme weather event.

Over half of participants reported having experienced heat-related illness in the last year, and nearly half of those who had experienced an HRI reported having ever gone to the doctor, hospital, and/or ED for this



Southwest Climate Podcast

August 2026 SW Climate Podcast - All Things Monsoon & Bananas El Niño



Recorded 08/13/2026, Aired 08/14/2026

Hosts Zack Guido and Mike Crimmins get out their mood rings in this month's Southwest Climate Podcast to share their frustration and disappointment in the monsoon so far. They do a deep dive into the characteristics of the monsoon including: the late onset, spatial pattern and population density bias (at least in sentiment). Will the East Pacific fire up a few tropical

systems as far as where the monsoon goes from here? They save time at the end on the bananas El Niño which is unprecedented already and is sure to bring an interesting fall to winter seasonal pattern.

[Listen Here](#)

About CLIMAS

The Climate Assessment for the Southwest (CLIMAS) program was established in 1998 as part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Regional Integrated Sciences and Assessments (RISA) Program. CLIMAS—housed at the University of Arizona's Institute of the Environment—is a collaboration between the University of Arizona and New Mexico State University. The CLIMAS team is made up of experts from a variety of social, physical, and natural sciences who work with partners across the Southwest to develop sustainable answers to regional climate challenges.



[Learn more about the NOAA RISA program here](#)



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