



September 2026: Southwest Climate Outlook



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Stacie Reece

October 2, 2026

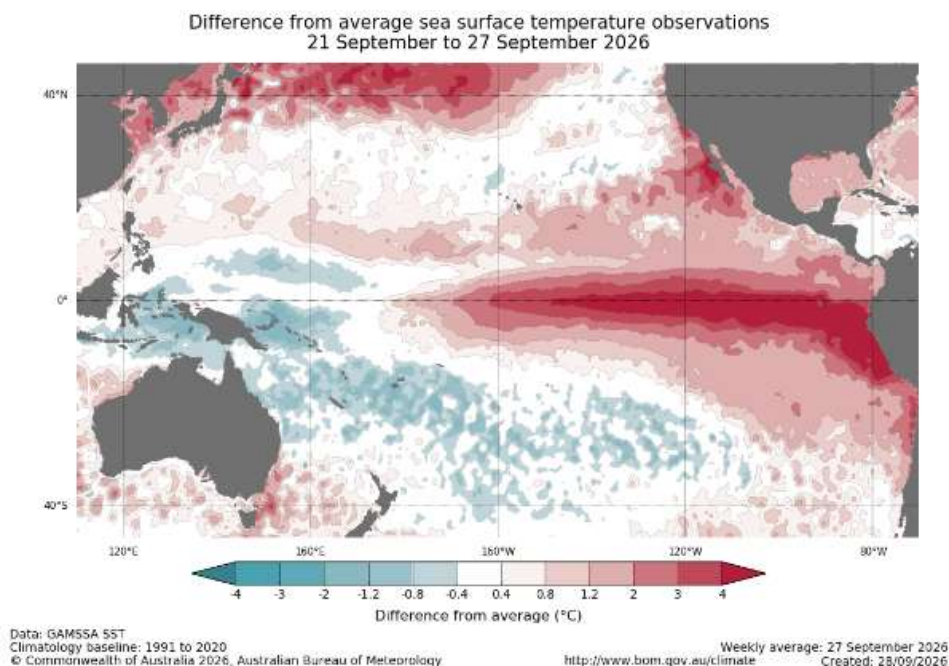


<https://climas.arizona.edu/>

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El Niño Highlight



Source: Australian Bureau of Meteorology.

El Niño conditions in the Pacific have been strengthening, with recent sea surface temperatures along the equator in the east central Pacific rising into the range that qualifies the event for *Very Strong* El Niño status, the highest of four categories of El Niño strength. El Niño is expected to continue strengthening before peaking some time before the end of the year, but El Niño conditions will very likely persist into spring.

Enhanced tropical storm activity in the East Pacific, associated with El Niño events, has been contributing to recent waves of excessive precipitation in the Southwest. Tropical storm activity will continue in October but impacts to the Southwest will be contingent on interactions with the varying large-scale wind patterns and other weather systems.

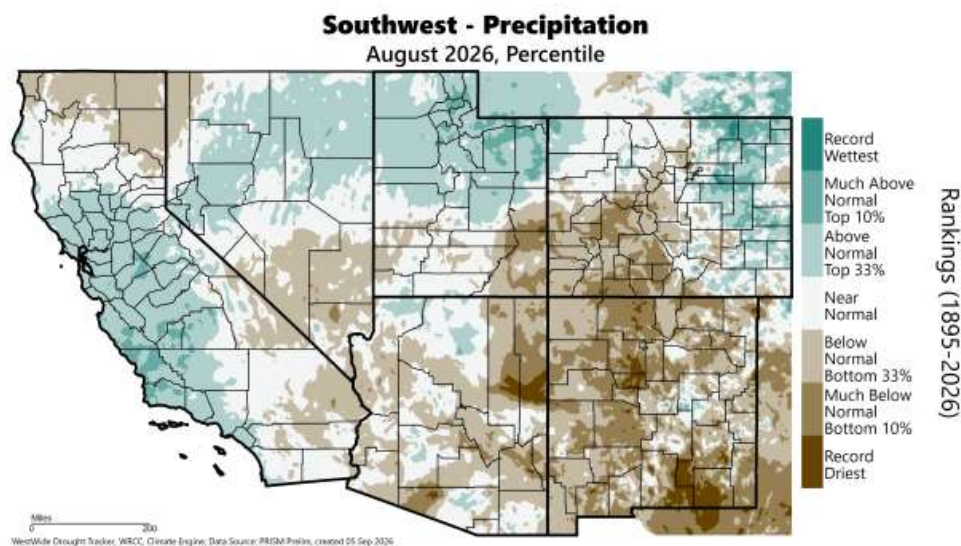
El Niño conditions through the cool season means increased chances of above normal precipitation, fall–spring

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.

See more in [ENSO Tracker](#)

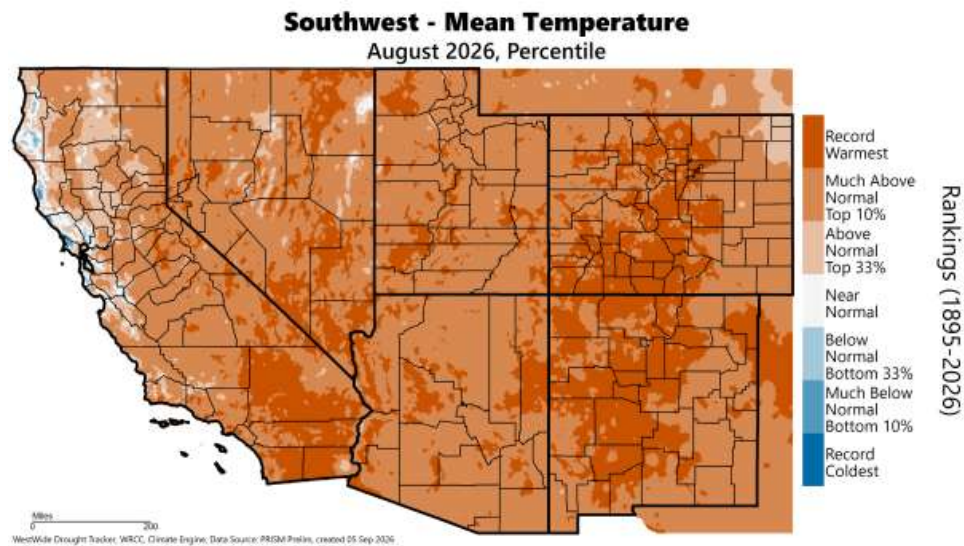
Precipitation and Temperature

August precipitation totals were below normal for much of Arizona and all but a few areas of New Mexico. Many areas saw precipitation totals falling in the much-below normal range, comparable to the driest 10% of Augusts on record. For some areas, this was the driest August on record—parts of Apache and Navajo Counties in Arizona, and parts of Bernalillo, Sandoval, Otero, Chavez, and Eddy Counties in New Mexico.



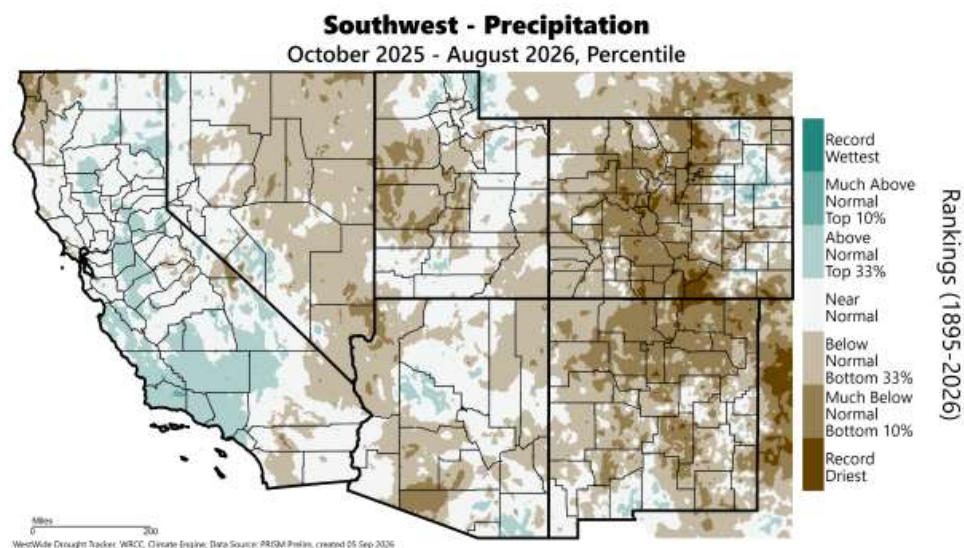
Source: [WestWide Drought Tracker](#)

Temperatures in August averaged much-above normal across the region. For much of New Mexico, and parts of Arizona, it was the warmest August on record.



Source: WestWide Drought Tracker

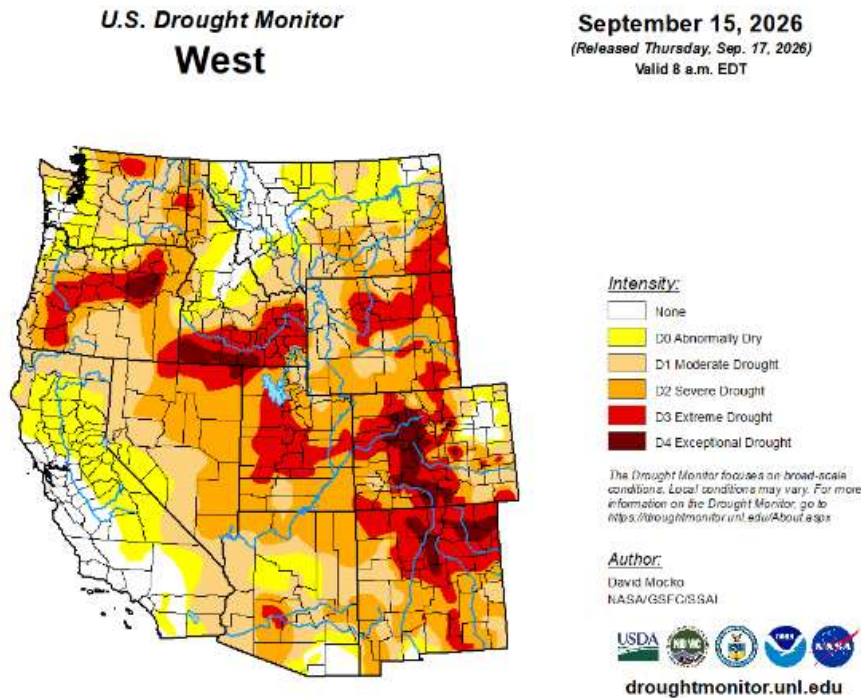
Precipitation totals over the water year so far (October 2025–August 2026) are below normal across all but a few parts of New Mexico, and much of the state saw totals that rank among the bottom 10% of years on record. Totals in Arizona generally fall in the near normal range or the below normal range, with only a few areas seeing much-below normal totals, and a few areas seeing above normal totals.



Source: WestWide Drought Tracker

Drought

Drought conditions classified Moderate (D1) to Severe (D2) are widespread in Arizona, despite some improvement of conditions over the past month in areas of Yavapai and Coconino Counties, and in the southeast part of the state. In New Mexico, conditions classified Severe (D2) to Exceptional (D4) are widespread.



Source: U.S. Drought Monitor

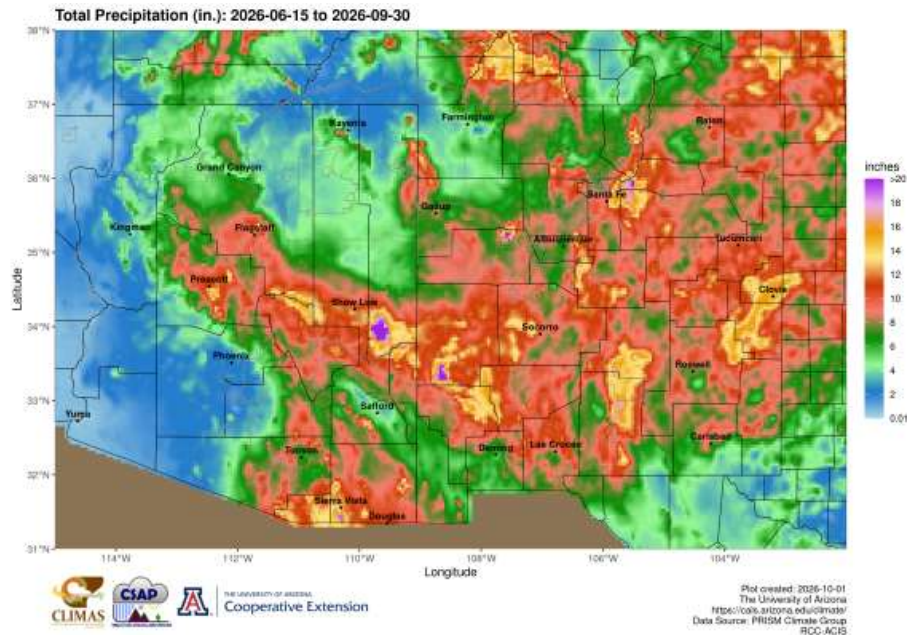
NIDIS Improved and Expanded State Pages on Drought.Gov

New Mexico

Arizona

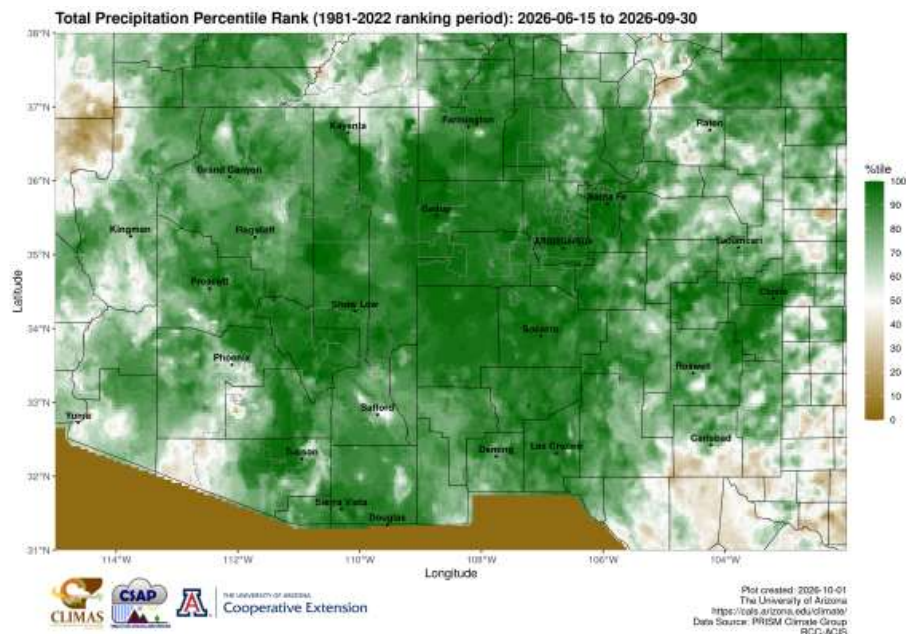
Monsoon

Monsoon rainfall totals (precipitation since June 15) vary across the region, from under an inch in western parts of Arizona, to more than 8 inches for many higher-elevation areas and much of eastern New Mexico, to more than 20 inches, estimated for the White Mountains of Arizona and the Mogollon Mountains of New Mexico.



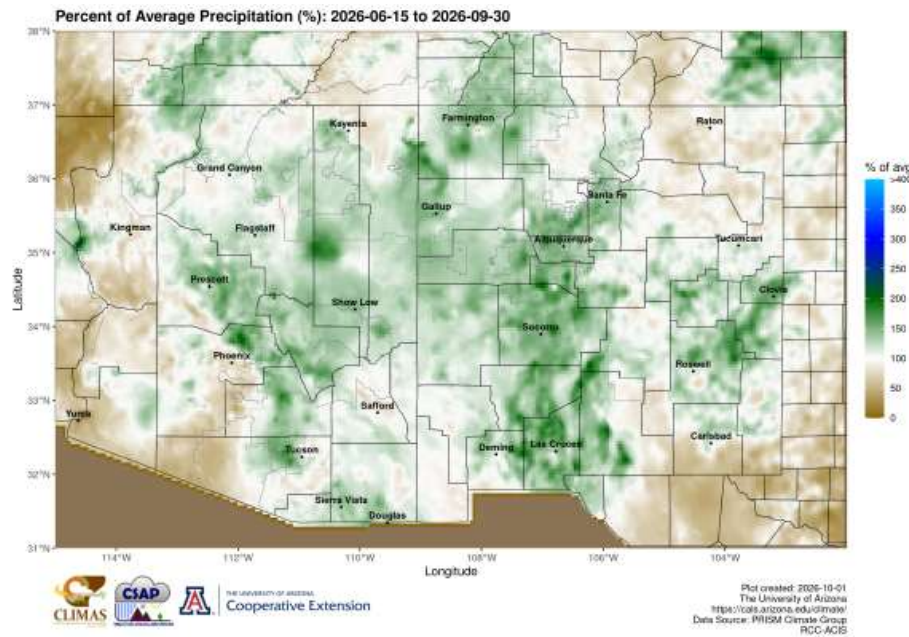
Source: University of Arizona Cooperative Extension - CSAP

Compared to past monsoons, this year's totals are above normal across much of Arizona and New Mexico. The area of western New Mexico from the Chuska Mountains south through Catron County saw some of the most abnormally high totals, with this year's season ranking at, or very near, the top of the rankings (1981–2022).



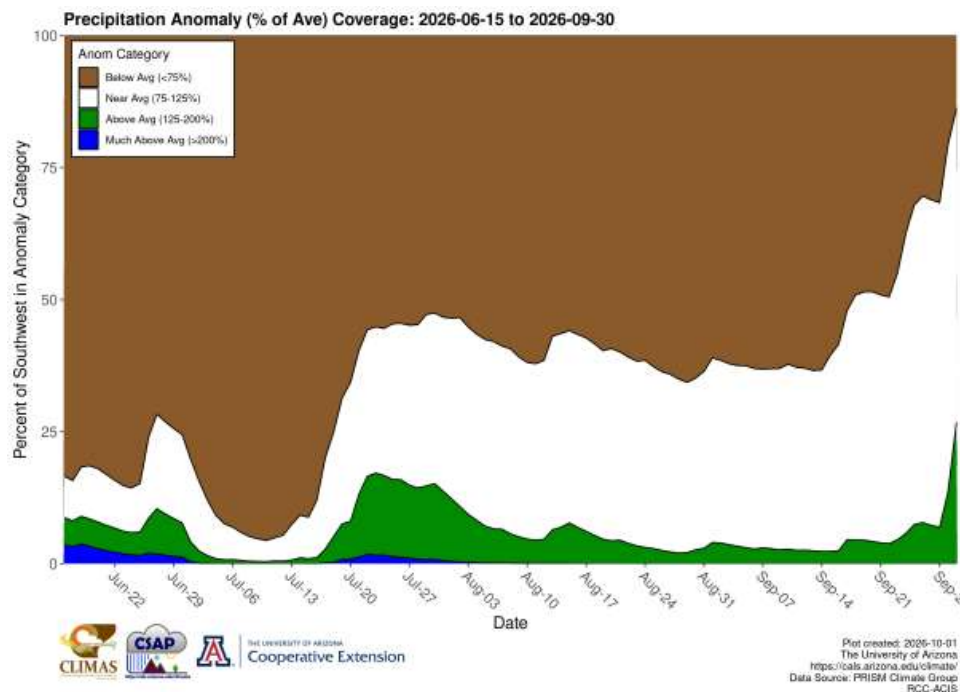
Source: University of Arizona Cooperative Extension - CSAP

Comparing to past monsoons using the *average* looks a little different than the above percentile ranking map because in the percentile ranking, “normal” is the median or 50th percentile, of past year’s monsoon totals, while in the percent-of-average map, “normal” is the average, or mean, of past years’ monsoon totals. The average is typically a larger number than the median for precipitation data. Some parts of the region had above-median but below average monsoon precipitation.



Source: University of Arizona Cooperative Extension - CSAP

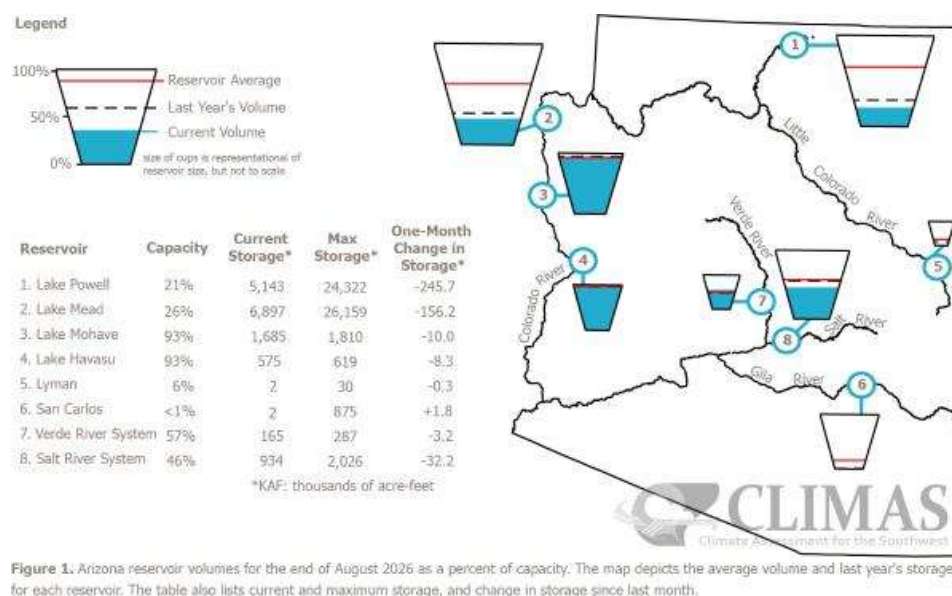
Over 75% of the region saw seasonal rainfall totals that were near or above average. Totals were below average for much of the region until late September, when a succession of widespread precipitation events brought seasonal totals up into the range of near normal or above normal for many areas.



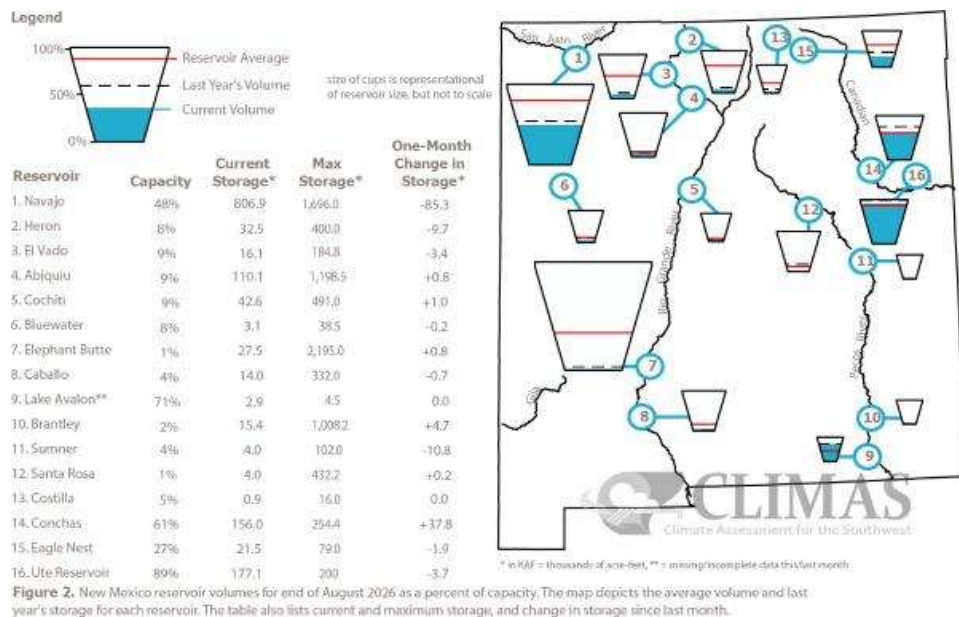
Source: University of Arizona Cooperative Extension - CSAP

Water Supply

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



New Mexico reservoir storage is generally below normal for this time of year and down compared to last year, with some exceptions in the eastern part of the state. Canadian River reservoirs are near normal levels—Conchas gained 37,800 acre-feet in August.

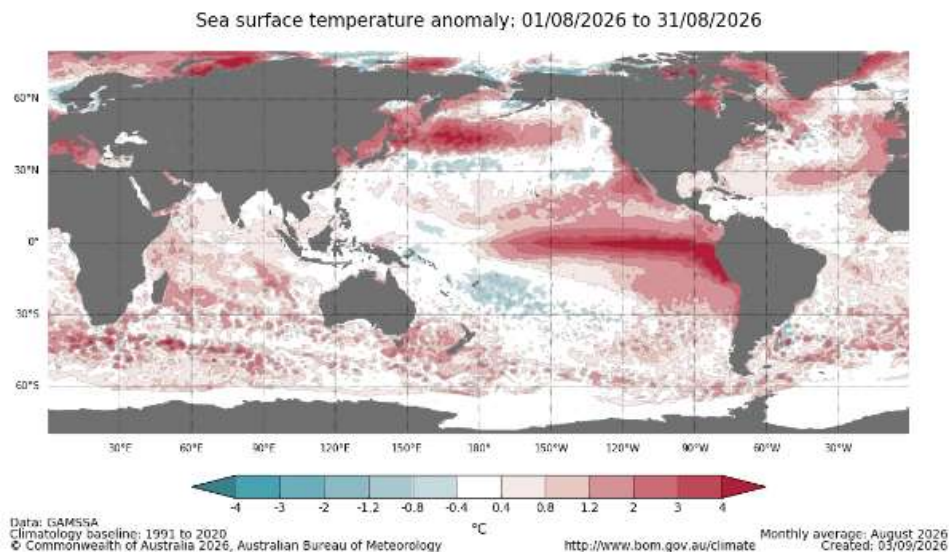


The map gives a representation of current storage for reservoirs in Arizona and New Mexico. Reservoir locations are numbered within the blue circles on the map, corresponding to the reservoirs listed in the table. The cup next to each reservoir shows the current storage (blue fill) as a percent of total 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

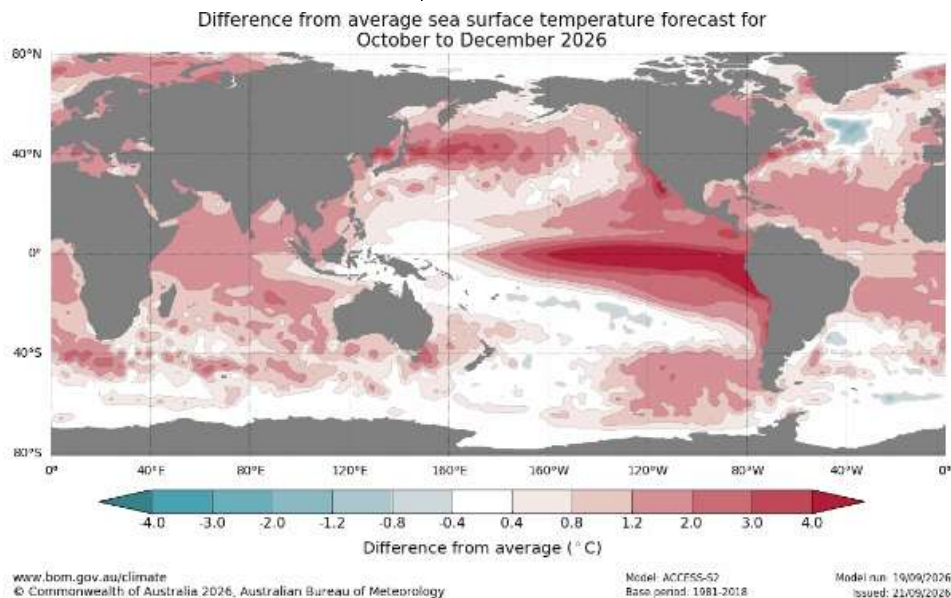
ENSO Tracker

August sea surface temperature (SST) anomalies (departures from normal August SSTs) reflect El Niño conditions in the Pacific—warmer waters along the equator in the central and eastern Pacific—which have been developing since early this year and growing stronger over past months.



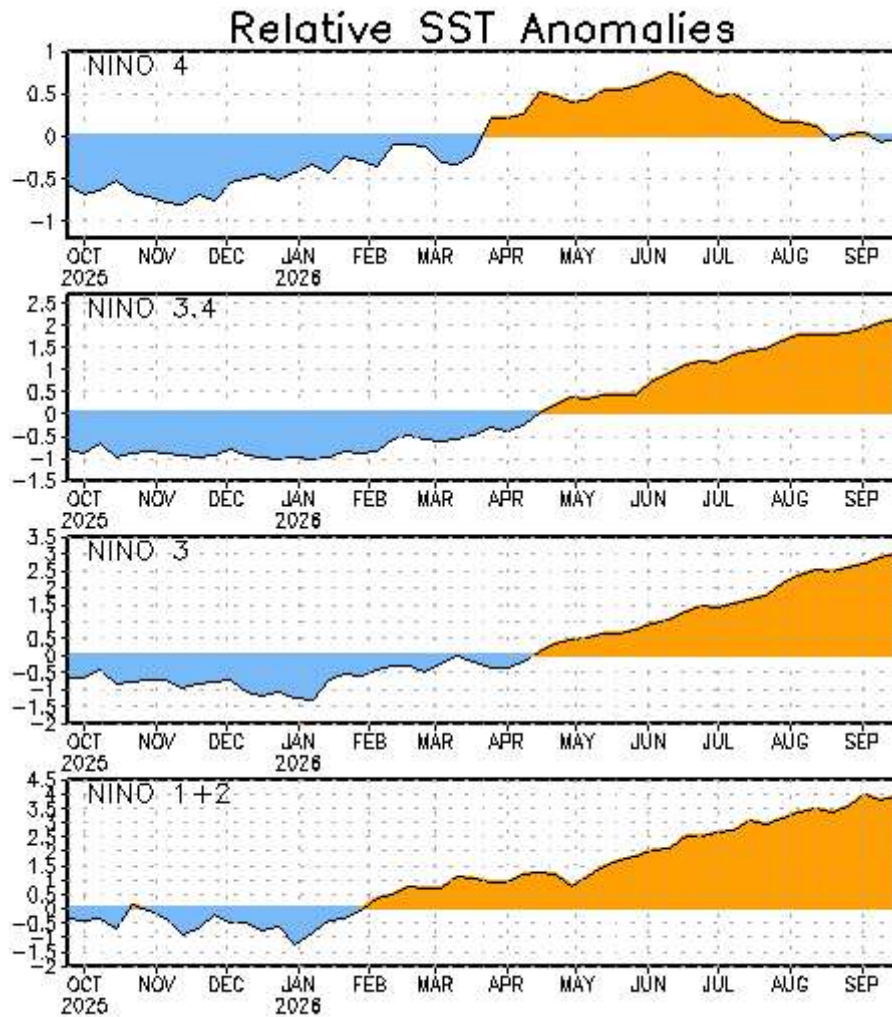
[Source: Australian Bureau of Meteorology](#)

El Niño conditions are expected to continue strengthening over the coming months. The widespread region of SST anomalies $> 4^{\circ}\text{C}$ shown on the October–December forecast from the Australian model ACCESS-S2 would be unprecedented in the historical record. That model represents the upper extreme of the range of forecasts; other models predict more modest strengthening.



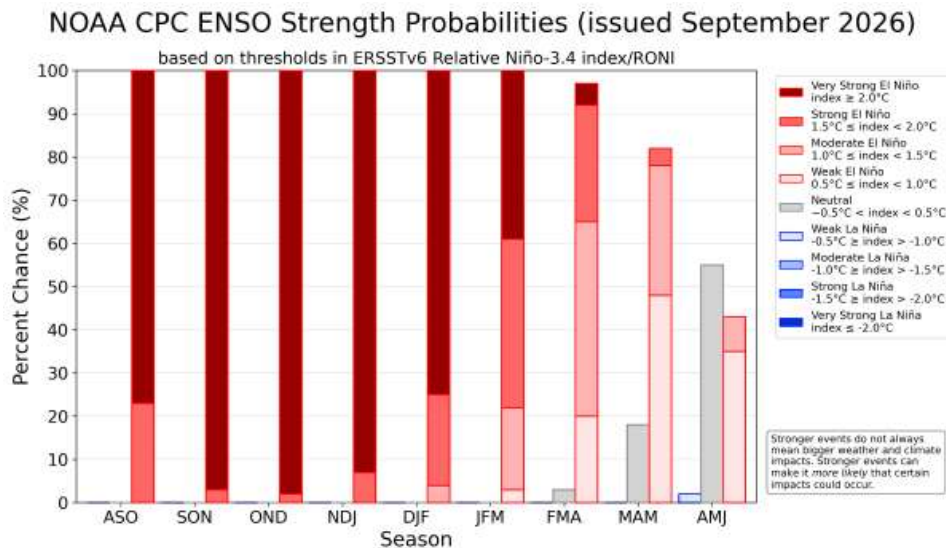
Source: Australian Bureau of Meteorology

SSTs in the Nino 3.4 monitoring region, which are used to classify the strength of El Niño conditions, have recently risen to more than 2° C above normal, which is the threshold temperature for Very Strong El Niño events—the highest of four categories of El Niño strength. For the current El Niño to officially count as a Very Strong El Niño, Nino 3.4 SSTs will have to remain above this threshold long enough for the three-month average SST anomaly to exceed 2°C.



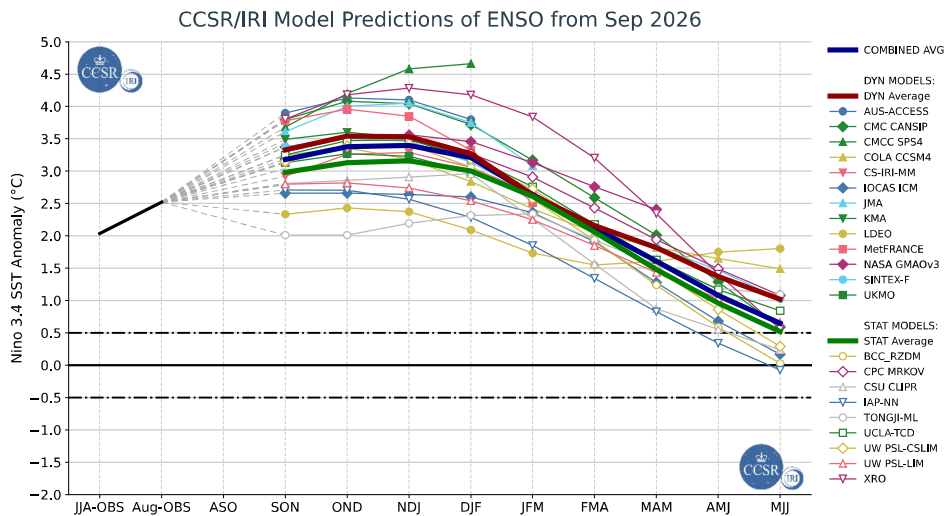
Source: NOAA Climate Prediction Center - ENSO

ENSO forecasts are indicating El Niño conditions are very likely to persist into spring 2027, with greater than 95% chance El Niño SST criteria will be met for the February–April Season (FMA). It’s likely August–October average SSTs will meet the criteria for a Very Strong El Niño event (over 75% chance), and very likely (over 90% chance) Very Strong El Niño conditions will remain in place through the November–January season (NDJ).



Source: NOAA Climate Prediction Center - ENSO

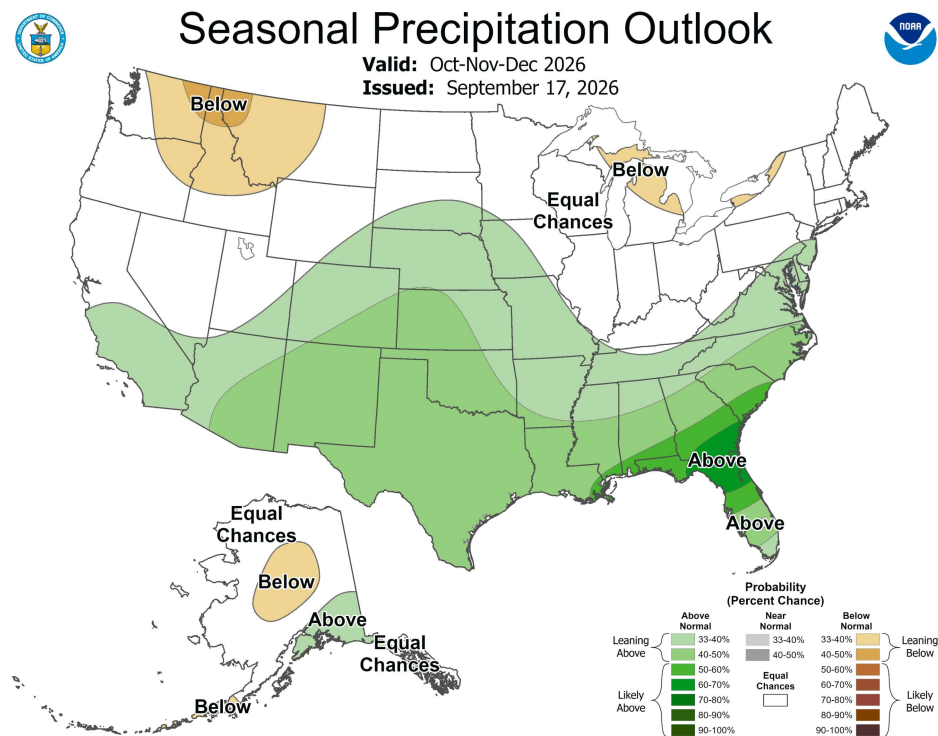
The range of forecasts from individual models includes predictions of El Niño peaking at unprecedented strength, with Nino 3.4 SST anomalies over 4°C. At the low end of the range of predicted strength, there are models predicting peak Nino 3.4 SST anomalies around 2.5°C—still a Very Strong El Niño. All models predict El Niño conditions (Nino 3.4 SST anomalies over 0.5°C) persisting through the March–May season.



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

Seasonal Forecasts

The October–December seasonal forecast has chances leaning toward above normal precipitation for Arizona and New Mexico—a 33–50% chance of precipitation totals that would place in the upper one-third of the rankings of past October–December seasons on record.



Source: Climate Prediction Center (NOAA)

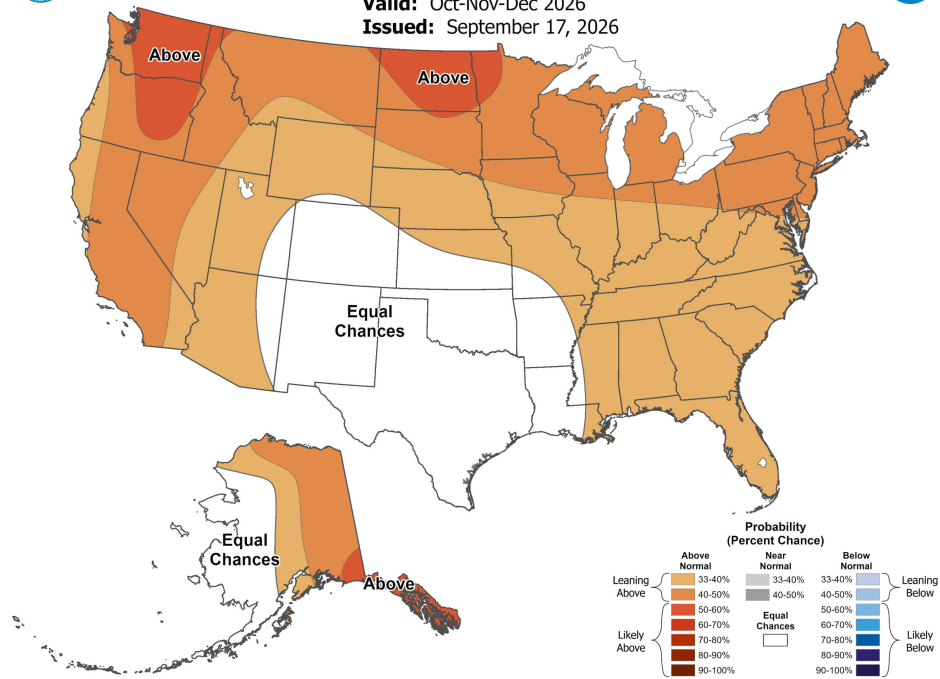
The October–December seasonal temperature forecast has chances leaning towards above normal temperatures for much of Arizona (33–40% chance), and gives equal chances of above normal, below normal, and near normal temperatures for New Mexico.



Seasonal Temperature Outlook

Valid: Oct-Nov-Dec 2026

Issued: September 17, 2026



Source: Climate Prediction Center (NOAA)

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](#)



Disclaimer

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