

## Current Drought

Exceptional heat and dryness prevailed across the Southwest U.S. since October 2025. Temperatures in the region were among the highest since 1951 (Fig. 1) and precipitation was below average, except for parts of Southern California.<sup>1</sup> Despite above-average precipitation in Southern California during the 2025-2026 wet season, the area received little precipitation after December (Fig. 2).

Winter snowpack in the Southwest U.S. becomes California's water resources in subsequent months and years. For much of the cold season, snow water equivalent in the Upper Colorado Region was far below the prior record low. It peaked three weeks ahead of schedule at only 50% of the typical volume. Low snowpack led to low water storage in Western U.S. reservoirs, including Lake Powell.

## Drought Outlook and Predictability

The ongoing El Niño event is almost certain to become strong or very strong by late 2026 and persist through early 2027. Strong El Niño events are historically related to above-average precipitation in the Southwest United States, which may improve water availability region-wide (Figure 3).

## Sector-Specific Outlooks

### Water Utilities



Reservoir and groundwater storage in California will decline through spring 2027 (as is typical), but remain at near-average levels (high confidence). Lakes Powell and Mead are predicted to remain at historically low levels, but above minimum power pool into spring 2027 due to interventions (high confidence). Reservoir storage is expected to increase in wetter conditions associated with the ongoing El Niño (high confidence).

### Public Health



There is a high risk of heat-related illnesses in Southern California and throughout the Southwest U.S. in summer 2026 (high confidence). The risk of poor air quality due to wildfire smoke will continue through summer and autumn due to fires across the Western U.S. (high confidence).

### Agriculture



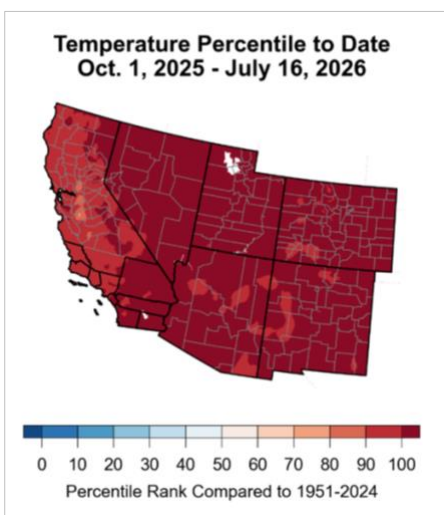
Warm temperatures and increased atmospheric water demand from the land surface and vegetation (evapotranspiration) will lead to greater demand for irrigation water (high confidence). Periods of extreme heat are likely to negatively affect agricultural workers, decreasing their productivity (high confidence).

<sup>1</sup> Here, Southern California includes San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura, Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Orange, Riverside, San Diego, and Imperial counties.

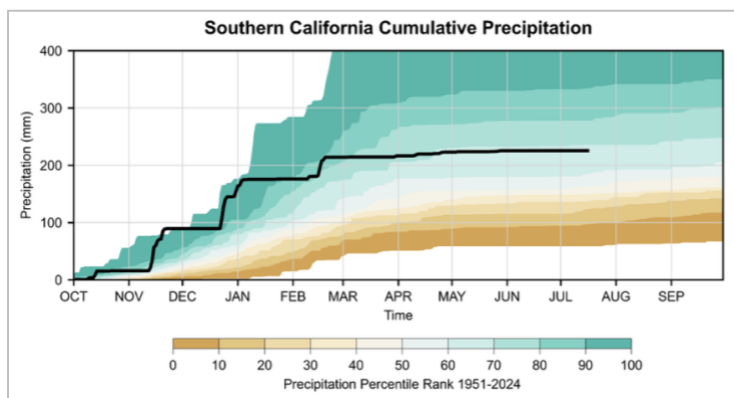
## About the Outlook

This outlook disseminates sector-specific drought scenarios that are based on tailored monitoring and forecasting information, which will enable users to make proactive decisions ahead of drought. The focus sectors include water utilities, agriculture, and public health in Southern California. This outlook uses data available as of July 23, 2026 at 10 a.m. PT unless indicated otherwise.

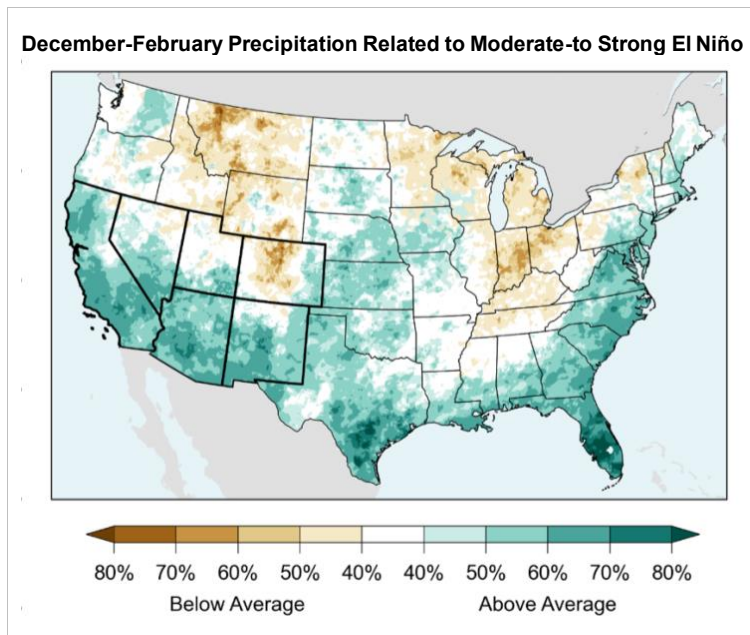
Several perspectives inform sector-specific drought scenarios, including observations of current conditions and expert interpretation of many types of forecasts to anticipate the future. [View graphics and supporting evidence.](#)



**Figure 1.** Between October 1, 2025 and July 16, 2026, temperature percentile rank compared to 1951-2024. NOAA Physical Sciences Laboratory based on NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information nclimgrid precipitation.



**Figure 2.** Precipitation accumulation since October 1 for 2025-26 (black line) and percentile rank for 1951-2024. NOAA Physical Sciences Laboratory based on NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information nclimgrid precipitation.



**Figure 3.** Frequency of above- and below-average December-February precipitation during strong El Niño events.