September 2026 Southern California Sector-Specific Drought Outlook Pilot

Current Drought

The Southwest has been unusually hot and dry since October 2025, with near-record temperatures and below-normal rainfall. (Figures 1 and 2) Although parts of coastal Southern California[1] had a wet start to the season, rain mostly stopped after December, allowing drought to spread into the area.

Drought Outlook and Predictability

The strong El Niño will likely become very strong by late 2026 and last into early 2027. Very strong El Niño events usually bring above-average rain to Southern California, mostly from heavy storms between December and March (Figures 3 and 4). From April to July, these events usually lead to higher river flows and better water supplies across the Southwest, though results varied over past El Niños.

Sector-Specific Outlooks

Water Utilities

The Southwest will likely see above-normal winter precipitation and as a result, higher 2027 streamflows (high confidence).

Reservoirs and groundwater levels should rise in 2027 compared to 2026 (high confidence). However, low reservoirs, such as Lakes Powell and Mead, need multiple wet years to fully recover (medium confidence).

Water availability is likely to be below average in 2028 (low confidence).

Public Health

The Western U.S. will likely see lower risk of wildfire and better air quality in spring, summer, and fall 2027 (high confidence).

Southern California is less likely to experience poor air quality from blowing dust from April to June (medium confidence). Southern California has a much higher risk of flooding from December through March (high confidence).

Agriculture

Higher agricultural yields are likely during late 2026 and 2027 (high confidence). However, intense rainfall over short periods could harm crops through waterlogging and localized flooding (medium confidence).

1 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 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 September 24, 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.

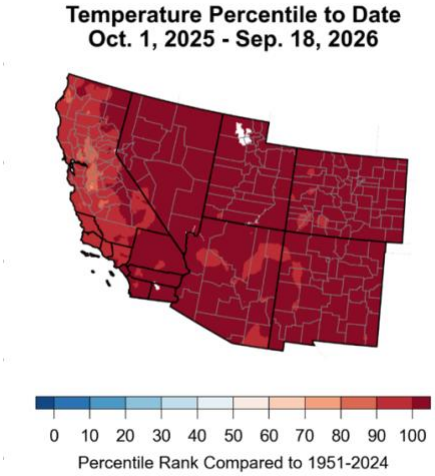

Figure 1. Between October 1, 2025 and September 18, 2026, (left) temperature percentile rank compared to 1951-2024. NOAA Physical Sciences Laboratory based on NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information nclimgrid precipitation.

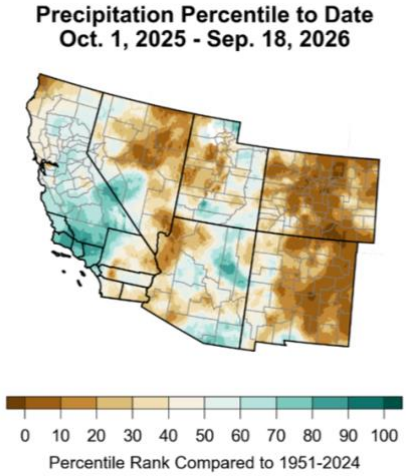

Figure 2. Between October 1, 2025 and September 18, 2026, precipitation percentile rank compared to 1951-2024. NOAA Physical Sciences Laboratory based on NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information nclimgrid precipitation.

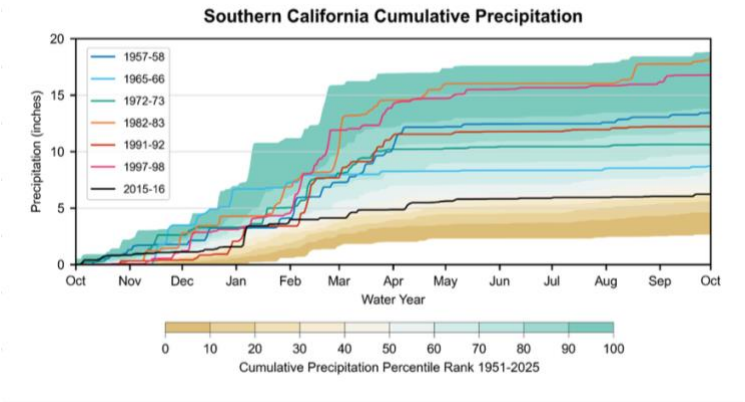

Figure 3: Frequency of above- and below-normal December-February precipitation. NOAA Physical Sciences Laboratory based on NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information nclimgrid precipitation.

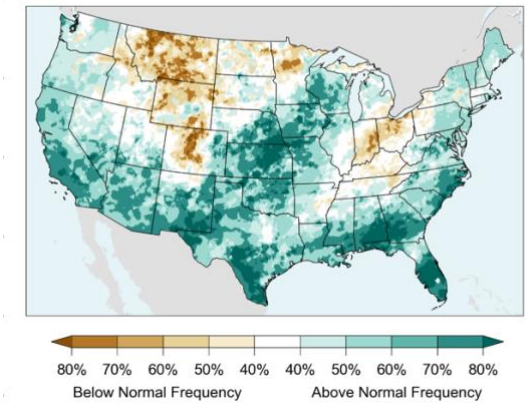

Figure 4: Southern California cumulative precipitation during very strong El Niño events. NOAA Physical Sciences Laboratory based on NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information nclimgrid precipitation.