

El Niño Is Strengthening. Is Your Farm Ready?

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El Niño is strengthening across the Pacific, and the developing 2026–27 event deserves the attention of farmers well beyond the regions where drought or excessive rainfall may occur. The reason is not simply that another major weather event is developing. Agriculture today is interconnected through feed, fertilizer, energy, commodity markets, and international trade. Weather problems affecting crops in Southeast Asia, forage production in Australia, or grain production elsewhere can eventually reach a dairy or beef operation thousands of kilometers away through higher feed prices or reduced availability of ingredients.

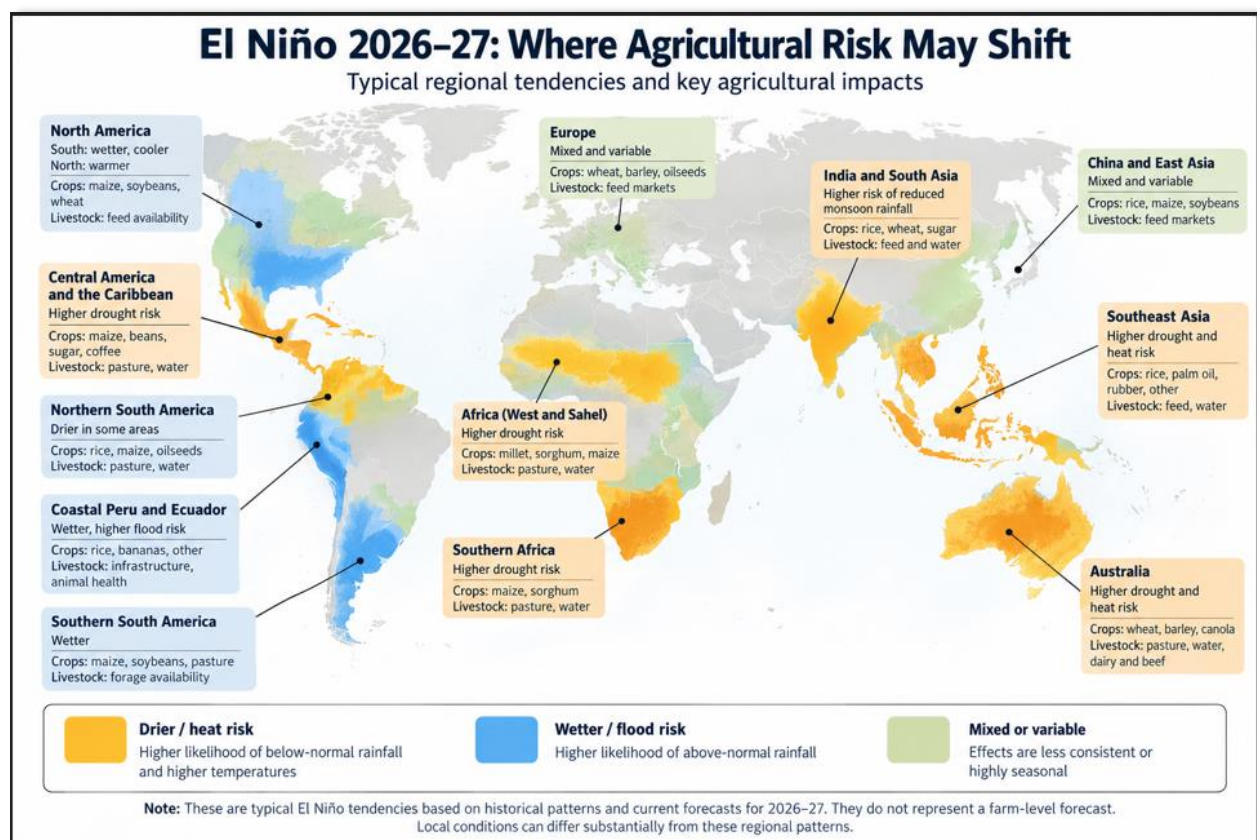


Figure 1: The 2026–27 El Niño event may increase drought and heat risk in some major agricultural regions while increasing excessive-rainfall risk in others. Local outcomes can differ from these broad historical tendencies.

The challenge with El Niño is that its effects are not uniform, it changes atmospheric circulation and rainfall patterns across large parts of the world, but the consequences differ by region and season. Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and surrounding areas, is particularly vulnerable to reduced rainfall and higher temperatures during strong El Niño conditions. Australia can also experience increased drought and heat risk. As the Southern Hemisphere growing season progresses, parts of southern Africa deserve close attention because

El Niño has historically been associated with reduced summer rainfall there. India presents a more complicated situation because it can weaken the summer monsoon, although the relationship varies among events.

South America illustrates why broad statements about its effects can be misleading. Southern Brazil, Uruguay, and parts of Argentina often experience wetter conditions, while northern South America and northeastern Brazil can become drier. Coastal areas of Peru and Ecuador may face the opposite problem, with excessive rainfall and flooding. El Niño winters in North America frequently favor wetter conditions across parts of the southern United States and warmer conditions across portions of the northern tier. The practical message for farmers is therefore not that it will result in drought everywhere. It means that the probability of abnormal weather changes, and farms need to understand which risks are most relevant to their location.

From weather risk to farm risk

The agricultural concern becomes greater when several important producing regions are affected at the same time. Southeast Asia is a major producer and exporter of rice, palm oil, and other agricultural commodities. Australia is important for wheat, barley, beef, and dairy products. India is a major producer of grains, oilseeds, sugar, and dairy products, while southern Africa depends heavily on rainfed maize production. Weather problems affecting only one region can often be compensated for by production elsewhere. Simultaneous disruptions are more difficult for international markets to absorb.

This is where El Niño becomes relevant even to farmers experiencing perfectly normal weather. A dairy producer in Europe or North America may never experience the drought occurring in Indonesia or Australia but could still encounter its economic consequences through feed markets. Reduced grain and oilseed production changes international trade flows, while shortages of forage or feed grains increase competition for available supplies. The impact can move from a rainfall deficit in one part of the world to the price of a ration ingredient in another.

For crop farmers in regions facing increased drought risk, preparation should begin with water rather than expected yield. Available soil moisture, irrigation capacity, reservoir levels, planting dates, crop selection, and expected water requirements need to be evaluated under more than one rainfall scenario. Selecting a crop or variety solely for maximum yield under normal conditions becomes less useful when water availability is uncertain. Where excessive rainfall is the greater El Niño risk, the priorities change toward drainage, erosion control, field accessibility, disease pressure, and the ability to harvest crops under wetter conditions.

This scenario-based approach is more useful than trying to predict precisely what will happen on an individual farm. Producers can examine what their cropping program would look like with normal rainfall, a moderate reduction, or a severe reduction in available water. Fertilizer applications, irrigation priorities, planting dates, and even the acreage assigned to individual crops can then be considered within each scenario. The purpose is not to assume that drought will occur, but to avoid discovering during the growing season that the farm has no practical alternative.

Dairy and beef farms need a feed and water plan.

For dairy farms, El Niño risk should be considered through the combined effects of forage availability, feed prices, water supply, and heat stress. These factors do not operate independently. Hotter conditions reduce dry matter intake and milk production while simultaneously increasing drinking-water requirements. Drought can reduce corn silage and hay yields, at the same time that cattle require more water and cooling. If several of these pressures occur together, maintaining production becomes progressively more expensive.

Forage inventories therefore deserve attention before shortages become obvious. Farms should know how much forage they have on hand, how long it will last at current feeding rates, and what would happen if the next harvest were 10, 15, or 20 percent below expectations. This does not necessarily mean purchasing large quantities of feed immediately. It means identifying which ingredients represent the greatest exposure and determining what alternatives could be incorporated into the ration if availability or price changes. Alternative fiber sources, crop residues, by-products, and locally available feeds are much easier to evaluate before they are urgently needed.

Water deserves the same scrutiny. Dairy cattle under heat stress can increase water intake, and the period of greatest demand may coincide with declining farm water supplies. Wells, reservoirs, water flow rates, trough capacity, irrigation needs, cooling systems, and emergency reserves should therefore be considered together. Fans, sprinklers, shade, and backup power also need to be functional before extreme heat develops, rather than repaired when cows are already experiencing heat stress.

Beef operations dependent on pasture face a different decision. Drought management becomes increasingly expensive when action is delayed until pasture conditions have deteriorated severely. Producers can establish beforehand the pasture or forage conditions that would trigger supplementation, early weaning, movement of cattle, reduced stocking rates, or partial destocking. Having these thresholds in place does not mean cattle must be sold simply because an El Niño has developed. It means that if forage production begins to decline, decisions can be based on predetermined biological and economic criteria rather than on the pressure of an emerging feed shortage.

Preparing for uncertainty

The most important lesson from El Niño is that farmers do not need to know exactly what the weather will do in order to prepare for it. Climate forecasts describe probabilities across regions, not rainfall on a particular field or pasture. A strong El Niño increases the likelihood of certain conditions, but it does not guarantee them. Farm planning should therefore focus on vulnerability rather than prediction.

For crop producers, that vulnerability may be water availability, drainage, or the timing of planting and harvest. For dairy farms, it may be forage inventories, purchased-feed exposure, cooling capacity, or water supply. For beef operations, it may be stocking rate and the number of grazing days available if pasture growth declines. Farms purchasing substantial quantities of feed should also consider their exposure to international commodity markets, even when local growing conditions remain favorable.

The developing 2026–27 El Niño may affect some agricultural regions much more severely than others, and its full impact will not be known for months. What can be determined now is where an individual farm is most vulnerable and which management options will remain available if conditions deteriorate. Preparing those alternatives while feed, water, and management choices are still available is easier than searching for them after drought, heat, or higher commodity prices have already arrived.

Further Reading

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