



PSA-017-El Nino-World Oceans

How do we save coral reefs?

Vic Ferguson

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White Christmas? Start worrying about El Niño and its effect on food prices

The Christmastime weather effects of El Niño will be felt across the world. Let's hope the economy – including your supermarket's produce aisle – can stand it



A wood sculptor works in Bethlehem. Is there a statue for El Niño, which is named after the baby Jesus?
Photograph: Luay Sababa/Xinhua Press/Corbis

[Debbie Carlson](#)

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While many Americans spend days wondering whether they will get a white Christmas, there's a bigger, better weather event to watch – and it's one that will affect the US economy.



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There's a good chance the weather phenomenon El Niño will appear in the next six months, weather forecasters say, but farmers don't need an official decree from meteorologists – they can just look out the window.

Those recent rains in California? Thank El Niño. Most farmers in Argentina and southern Brazil are also getting extra precipitation. The weather phenomenon was named El Niño, a reference to the Spanish phrase for "Christ child", because it often arrives around Christmas.

El Niño does not bring gifts of rain to all farmers.

In Australia and some countries in the western Pacific, the phenomenon usually means drier weather.

On 4 December, the US Climate Prediction Center said in its monthly forecast the odds for an El Niño to be "present" during the next six months are 65%.

If it is confirmed, El Niño is expected to last until spring 2015.

There's not yet a definitive declaration of the weather event because the Climate Prediction Center takes the three-month average sea-surface temperature in the east-central Pacific Ocean before declaring the onset of an El Niño episode.

Agricultural meteorologists and traders say some global weather patterns in the past few weeks suggest the hand of El Niño, but added that this year's event is not a prime example.

"It's not textbook material. The textbook variety of El Niño produces well-above average temperatures across the eastern equatorial Pacific, from the International Dateline to the southern American coast," said Drew Lerner, the owner of World Weather Inc.

The warmer temperatures are there, but other events like the pool of colder-than-normal water in the western Pacific Ocean around Indonesia and Malaysia is small, and some of the areas that go drier during the cycle haven't been as parched.



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"There are few areas outside of Australia that have had serious dryness. Indonesia and Malaysia have seen regular rain. If this were a traditional El Niño, they would be bone-dry" by early December, Lerner said.

The lack of definite correlations so far makes this a "weak" El Niño, said Mike Tannura, chief meteorologist at T-Storm Weather.

Even so, there are some typical El Niño weather patterns hitting parts of Argentina, Brazil and California bringing beneficial rains to crop areas. This time of year is the prime growing season in the southern hemisphere.



Bunches of asparagus are seen at a processing plant in Ica, Peru. El Niño, the Christmastime storms, may have an unpredictable effect on produce. Photograph: Pilar Olivares/Reuters



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“Typically El Niño years mean wetter-than-normal conditions across much of Argentina and southern Brazil. We’ve already seen conditions that fit that bill across those regions for most of the last month, so in a sense I wouldn’t anticipate that an official declaration of El Niño would really mean that much of a difference for those regions,” said Bennett Meier, agricultural strategist at Morgan Stanley.

That extra rain means the chance for a bumper crop out of the southern hemisphere. Brazil’s government forecaster, Conab, already raised its forecast for soybeans 11% over last season, to 95.8m tons. That would be a record if realized. Brazil is the second-largest global soybean producer, behind the US.

That estimate is slightly higher than the US Department of Agriculture’s estimate of the Brazilian crop, 94m tons.

It’s still early in the season, though, said Sean Lusk, director of the commercial hedging division at Walsh Trading. The key development time for Argentinian and Brazilian soybeans is January, which is similar to August in the US.

“If conditions we’re seeing persist – so far, so good – the first two to three weeks of January will put [price] pressure on the markets,” Lusk said.

Meier said so far he’s penciling in just average yields for South American soybean production, but said there is a risk yields could rise if the weather is good.

Even if Argentina and Brazil deliver only an average-sized crop, Meier said his outlook for crop prices is negative because the US had a mammoth harvest in the past few months and total global supplies are hefty.

Australia is one region that isn’t happy that El Niño is back. Lerner said the main growing areas Down Under, Queensland and part of New South Wales, were already dry. That’s hurt the sugar cane, grain and cotton crops, he said.

“Some farmers chose not to plant because of the forecast for El Niño. For others who did, the hot, dry conditions in recent weeks caused withering and brought death to crop,” Lerner said, particularly for farmers who rely on natural rainfall for water.



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El Niño will bring rains to California but may cause trouble elsewhere for crop prices. Photograph: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

Areas that use irrigation were not suffering, he said. Some recent rains fell in agricultural areas, but not enough to help crops.

Both Tannura and Lerner said traditionally El Niño is very kind to California, and the early December rains were related to the weather event.

Still, Lerner said, what's lacking currently is the colder air El Niño brings, and the snowpack in the mountains is very low. He said there's still time for the snowpack to build up in the mountains, but as of early December it was only 6% to 8% of 1 April levels.

A few rain storms, though, won't alleviate the severe dryness the state is experiencing, they said.

"One rain event will not break that drought," Tannura said. "You need long, sustained periods with good rains and snows to break it. The El Niño pattern is exactly what you want to start doing that."



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But before California farmers start rejoicing, Lerner notes El Niño isn't the only kid in town.

"It has to interact with other prevailing weather patterns. There is a pattern prevailing that wants to take the storm track to the east. Then, California's northern and central parts will turn drier as we get into the heart of the winter season. Southern California and Arizona may do better with precipitation," Lerner said.