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1 September 2026

South African Weather Service statement on the 2026/27 El Niño

A strong El Niño event has formed in the Pacific Ocean and is likely to become a very strong event this spring. In fact, the latest weekly-averaged sea surface temperate anomalies over the eastern central tropical Pacific Ocean are already exceeding the threshold that defines a very strong El Niño. The latest predictions are indicative that the El Niño will likely intensify further to become the strongest event in living memory. A strong El Niño refers to an event where 3-monthly averaged sea surface temperature anomalies over the eastern central tropical Pacific Ocean are exceeding 1,5°C with respect to climatology, while during a very strong El Niño, this part of the ocean is 2°C warmer than normal. The latest forecasts indicate that the current event will very likely exceed the 3°C threshold (Figure 1).

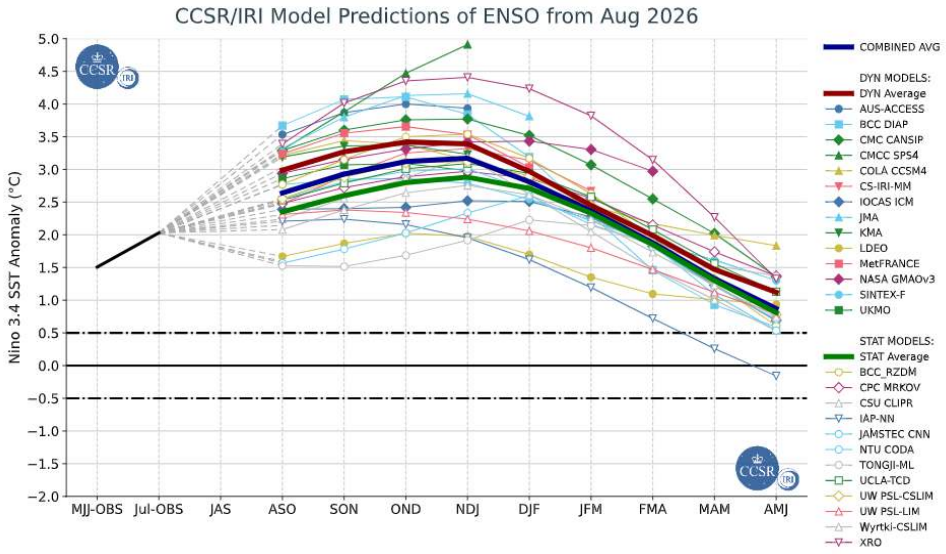

Figure 1: The temperature anomalies over the eastern central tropical Pacific Ocean (Source: IRI – International Research Institute for Climate and Society | August 2026 Quick Look).

Most El Niño events bring conditions of below-normal rainfall and above-normal temperatures to the southern African region. Two of the most impactful El Niño events for the southern African region are those of 1982/83 and 2015/16, which brought widespread drought. The very strong El Niño event of 1997/98, however, was associated with slightly above-normal rainfall over parts of South Africa's summer rainfall region. It should

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therefore be noted that, although below-normal rainfall is statistically the most likely outcome in southern Africa this summer, not every single El Niño event is associated with drought.

The latest seasonal forecast of the South African Weather Service for the October to December 2026 period indicates that below-normal rainfall is the most likely outcome over most of South Africa (Figure 2, left). This period is also very likely to be associated with above-normal temperatures (Figure 2, right). To put the maximum temperature forecast into perspective, the above-normal threshold for mean October to December maximum temperatures (based on the October to December seasons from 1981 to 2010) is shown in Figure 3. The October to December 2026 maximum temperature forecast (Figure 2, right) shows a high likelihood for the mean maximum temperatures to be higher than the temperatures indicated in Figure 3. The rainfall and temperature forecast for the November 2026 to January 2027 period is very similar to that of the October to December 2026 period, with the most likely outcome for drier and warmer conditions over most of the country.

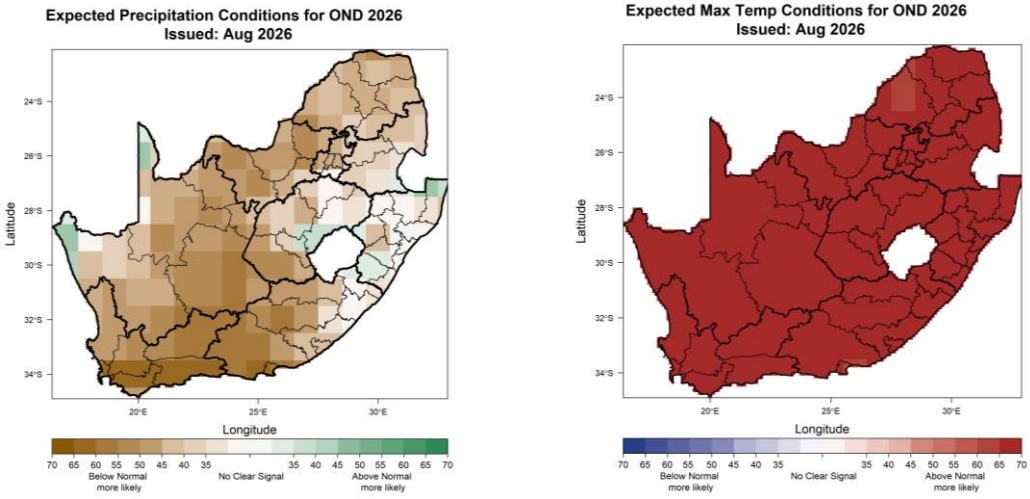

Figure 2: October-November-December (OND) 2026 rainfall forecast (left) and maximum temperature forecast (right).

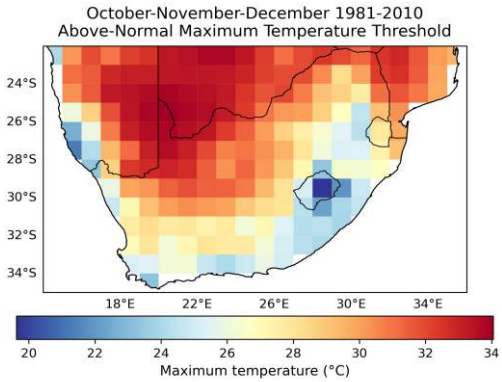

Figure 3: October-November-December threshold for above-normal maximum temperature based on the 1981 – 2010 period.

It should be noted that the expected very strong El Niño of 2026/27, in combination with global warming, will likely result in 2027 being the warmest year ever recorded. The 2015/16 very strong El Niño event brought

unprecedented heatwaves to the southern African region. In the 11 years that have since passed, the southern African region has also continued to warm. If the 2026/27 El Niño event brings the expected below-normal rainfall to southern Africa, it is likely that a high frequency of heatwaves will co-occur. These heatwaves have the potential to be severe. However, as current forecasts indicate the potential for an exceptionally strong El Niño, uncertainty remains regarding its eventual strength and regional impacts. For this reason, the extent of expected heatwaves and water scarcity associated with the event will be closely monitored and communicated among Disaster Management structures, weather sensitive industries, the media and the public.

The public and weather sensitive industries are strongly advised to follow the monthly seasonal forecast updates and daily short-term weather forecasts to be prepared for heatwave conditions or other high impact weather events.

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