



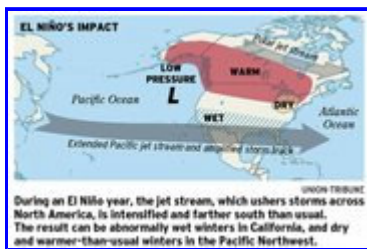
# Conditions brewing for possible El Niño



## Phenomenon could knock out drought

By [Robert Krier](#), Union-Tribune Staff Writer

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## TRACK RECORD

Strong El Niños usually deliver more rain, while weak ones are unpredictable.

Here are recent El Niños, their strength (degrees above normal at the sea surface in the Central Pacific) and rainfall in San Diego:

**April 1997 to June 1998** – 4.5 degrees; 17.78 inches

**April 2002 to April 2003** – 2.7 degrees; 10.62 inches

**May 2004 to March 2005** – 1.6 degrees; 22.49 inches

**July 2006 to February 2007** – 2 degrees; 3.85 inches

*Online: For Robert Krier's Weather Watch blog, go to [WeatherWatch.uniontrib.com](http://WeatherWatch.uniontrib.com)*

If drought-stricken San Diego County had a meteorological superhero, it would probably be dubbed El Niño.

The atmospheric phenomenon is showing signs of flexing its muscles, perhaps by summer, and that prospect has long-range forecasters sizing up the possibilities. Many long-range computer models are indicating that El Niño is brewing.

When “the boy” (as the words mean in Spanish) is strong, it can knock out a drought like the one California has endured for the past three years.

But the superhero could be caught without a cape. There's still a chance that evolving conditions will slacken – and the promise of a wet year would then dry up.

“We are forecasting an El Niño this year,” said David Pierce, a climate researcher at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla. “Hopefully, it will bring a little more rain, not only to San Diego but to the entire Southwest. That would be quite nice.”

Climate experts don't expect a significant atmospheric change based on the emerging conditions, but Pierce said a big shift can't be ruled out. A weak El Niño would create a guessing game: It could bring a lot of rain or hardly a drop of moisture.

“I don't see the white horse charging over the horizon to give us a good drenching next winter,” said William Patzert, a research oceanographer at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena.

It's pretty early to make predictions, said Elissa Lynn, senior meteorologist for the state's Department of Water Resources. “It's hard to tell whether it has legs, and unless it's a really strong El Niño, you can't say for sure what it will do for us.”

Forecasters at the Climate Prediction Center in Maryland said conditions are favorable for a transition to El Niño between June and August.

“I equate this to a tornado watch,” said Mike Halpert, the center's lead forecaster. “Things are favorable, but it's not like it's a guarantee.”

El Niños are marked by months-long spikes in sea-surface temperatures in the equatorial Pacific. When those temperatures rise several degrees above normal, there's usually a dramatic shift in weather patterns around the globe.

The jet stream, which pushes storms from west to east around the planet, grows powerful and drops farther south. It almost always brings California abundant rain and leaves the Pacific Northwest drier than usual.

The last strong El Niño was in 1997-98. San Diego got 17.78 inches of rain that year. The city's average rainfall is 10.77 inches, and it has received 9.12 this year.

Weak El Niños have had widely varying effects on Southern California.

San Diego got 22.49 inches of rain from a weak condition in 2004-05, then just 3.85 inches during another minor episode in 2006-07.

This year's fledgling El Niño could strengthen by fall and rival the big event in '97-98, said Pierce at Scripps.

Nathan Mantua, a research scientist at the University of Washington's Climate Impacts group, is thinking along similar lines.

“If winds and currents start working in concert, the ocean could warm rapidly,” he said. “A powerful El

Niño on the level of the 1997-98 event is possible.”

Patzert doesn't see that happening.

“The chances of this being a major El Niño are about the same as the Padres winning the pennant,” he said. “It's definitely a long shot.”

The prospect of a strong El Niño is extremely appealing to local farmers. Plentiful rainfall would allow growers to skip irrigation cycles and use less imported water, which is increasingly expensive, said Eric Larsen, executive director of the San Diego County Farm Bureau.

Heavy rain also would leach built-up salts from the soil.

But farmers are not counting on an El Niño.

“It's a curiosity at this point,” Larsen said. “You have to wait and see what happens. It's certainly not something you can make a business decision on.”

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