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Information and Knowledge Management Division

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A once-in-a-century 'super El Niño' may be brewing in the Pacific

Scientists are watching the Pacific Ocean closely as what could be one of the most powerful climate events in recorded history rapidly builds beneath its surface.

According to the most recent forecasts from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the probability of an El Niño – a periodic warming of the tropical Pacific that reshapes weather patterns across the globe – emerging by July now sits at 61 per cent.

While these events happen every few years, this one may be supercharged. NOAA gives a one-in-four chance of the event reaching “very strong” intensity, which would qualify it as a so-called 'super' El Niño. Such a threshold has been crossed only a handful of times in recorded history, each moment triggering droughts, floods and record temperatures across multiple continents.

What's more, scientists who study these phenomena closely say such an event coupled with the impacts of human-caused climate change could make it unlike anything seen before.

“I would suggest there is roughly a 50 per cent chance of the event becoming the strongest in the historical record right now,” Paul Roundy, a professor of atmospheric science at the University at Albany, in the US, told BBC Science Focus. “A few weeks ago, I was suggesting maybe 20 per cent.”

What is El Niño, and why is this one different?

El Niño is a recurring climate cycle driven by the warming of surface waters in the tropical Pacific.

Every few years, the trade winds that normally push warm water westward weaken or reverse, allowing accumulated heat to spread eastward along the equator.

A super El Niño is defined by sea surface temperatures in a key stretch of the central Pacific rising more than 2°C (3.6°F) above normal. Only three have happened in recorded history: in 1982/83, 1997/98 and 2015/16.

In 1876, before modern meteorological records, a super El Niño is thought to have contributed to a global famine that killed as many as 50 million people.

This satellite data shows the 2015 super El Niño developing as warm water accumulates in the Pacific Ocean. This year's could be similarly strong, but comes amid a warmer global climate - Photo credit: NASA Earth Observatory/Michala Garrison

This year, Roundy explained, a series of extraordinarily powerful westerly wind bursts over the Pacific have pushed a vast reservoir of accumulated water eastward toward the equator.

The closest parallel is a wind event in early 1997, which preceded what was probably the strongest El Niño of the 20th century.

"The warm water to the east of this year's westerly wind burst is about half a degree warmer than the warm water was at the same time in 1997," Roundy said. "It has basically been hit with all the momentum that is needed to bring the event over the intensity of what was achieved then."

Still, the outcome is anything but settled. Future wind shifts could still partially offset the developing event.

Roundy said: "Based on the distributions of historical surges in the trade winds and the distribution of westerly wind events, and how strong the recent event has been, it would take an event well beyond the 99th percentile in intense trade winds to render the developing El Niño event just strong and not extremely strong."

In other words: a very strong El Niño is now close to certain. But whether it breaks all records remains an open question.

What does a super El Niño actually do?

The impacts of El Niño are felt the world over. From diminished fish stocks off the coast of Peru to suppression of monsoons and rainfall in India, China and much of Southeast Asia, barely a corner of the planet is left unchanged.

"Normally wet places become dry and suffer fires," Roundy said. "Normally dry places become wet."

In the US, impacts of the developing El Niño could begin to be felt this summer. Typically, more rain hits the Midwest and West during the summer months, while periods of drier weather are seen stretching from the Gulf Coast to the East Coast.

By winter, as El Niño becomes more established, it strengthens the southern storm track – bringing heavy rain across the South from California to the East Coast.

1982 and 1997 were, in Roundy's words, "incredible flood years" in the US. Meanwhile, the northern tier of the US runs warmer than usual over the winter.

One possible benefit of a strong El Niño is a suppression of the Atlantic hurricane season as increased wind shear prevents storms from forming.

Into uncharted territory

None of this would be straightforward in any year. But 2026 is not any year. Global temperatures are already running over 1.4°C above pre-industrial levels, and a strong El Niño layered on top of that baseline takes the climate system somewhere it has not been in modern human history.

“We’ve never experienced a strong or very strong El Niño event amid pre-existing conditions that were this warm globally,” Dr Daniel Swain, climate scientist at the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources (UCANR), said in a statement. “Therefore, it would not be surprising to see some unprecedented global impacts by later in 2026 into 2027 in terms of flood, drought, and wildfire-related extremes.

“Either 2026 or 2027 (or both) stand a good chance of setting a new global temperature record, yet again.”

At such high temperatures, wildfires become particularly concerning. A super El Niño “against the backdrop of elevated baseline temperatures could increase the risk of widespread or unusually intense fires in normally damp regions where such fires are not common,” Swain said, pointing specifically to the Amazon and parts of Oceania, where peatlands “can burn for months on end”.

A December 2025 study in Nature Communications adds a longer-term dimension to these concerns. Analysing all three super El Niños on record alongside climate model projections, researchers found that events of this intensity significantly increase the likelihood of “climate regime shifts” – abrupt, persistent transitions in temperature, sea surface conditions, and soil moisture that can endure for years or even decades after the El Niño itself has faded.

Under global warming scenarios, the study found, this effect would be “greatly amplified”, with the central North Pacific, the Gulf of Mexico, East Africa, the Amazon, central Australia, and the Maritime Continent around Indonesia likely to be worst affected.

The implication is that the effects of a 2026 super El Niño may not simply reverse when Pacific temperatures cool again – some changes could lock in.

Roundy urged caution about overstating that conclusion, however. With only three super El Niños on record, the foundations of any predictions about what follows are shaky at best.

“Scientists who are basing their conclusions on what is likely to happen this time, based on a small sample of past events, should not have as much confidence in whether we are going to have supercharged global warming for the next 10 years, or whether it is just enhanced for the next year or so,” Roundy said.

In short, the scale and trajectory of what's developing in the Pacific is unusual, and we're heading into it with a climate system running hotter than at any point in our post-industrial era.

"Ecosystems have evolved with El Niño for millions of years, and they need some of these extreme events in order to renew those ecosystems," Roundy said.

"But it has a big human impact, a social impact, and an impact on life."

Exactly how dramatic, damaging and long-lasting its impacts are, though, remains deeply uncertain.

ECO BUSINESS

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Asia's institutional investors managing some US\$123 trillion are bumping up their investments in climate solutions or transition finance, with a tripling in direct engagements with policymakers for clearer and more investable frameworks, a new report shows.

The latest State of Investor Climate Transition in Asia report — now in its seventh edition — by the Asia Investor Group on Climate Change (AIGCC) found 30 per cent of 240 investors bumped up investments in climate solutions in 2025, up 11 points from the year before.

“We need to see policy change in order to actually create movement at the corporate level, but also to invest successfully on behalf of our members,” said Stephen Dunne, director and investment committee chair of the Construction and Building Unions Superannuation (Cbus) Super Fund, one of Australia's largest industry funds to manage retirement savings.

Speaking on a panel at the organisation's inaugural summit on climate investment in Asia today, he said if the world continues on its current trajectory of global temperature rise, Cbus' returns for its one million plus members would be 40 per cent worse off than a 1.5°C-aligned portfolio.

Dunne, who is also chair of AIGCC parent organisation the Investor Group on Climate Change (IGCC), added that the most effective way to engage with governments for policy change is to do it in a “collaborative collective way” through organisations like AIGCC.

The organisation's latest report also found that these engagements have broadened in scope, from setting emissions targets to covering transition planning, technological innovation, physical climate risks and nature-related disclosures.

“The findings from this year's analysis suggest the market is now entering a third phase — an implementation phase — along with creating credible transition plans,” AIGCC said. This follows a first phase marked by a focus on climate-related measurements and disclosures, then a second phase of public scrutiny and accountability.

Still, there is room for improvement. Less than a third of investors in Asia have established a policy or strategy related to high-emitting sectors, including fossil fuels, and there has been no increase in the 22 per cent of investors publishing more granular climate transition plans.

The report found that most investors in Asia show limited details on the implementation of transition plans, which are a strong indicator of whether investors have thought through a strategy to manage climate-related risks and opportunities.

“With Asia being one of the most vulnerable regions to oil supply shocks and fluctuating prices, investors can do more to derisk their portfolios by investing in an orderly and energy-secure transition,” AIGCC said.

Another recent, separate study found that an increasing proportion of investors are unlikely to decrease their fossil fuel investments due to a fear of missing out on high returns over the next three years.

Even more nascent to the investors that AIGCC reviewed the idea of a just transition, which the investor group assessed for the first time in their report this year.

Although 29 per cent of AIGCC members report having a just transition strategy, the percentage is much lower for non-members — only 11 per cent of all investors say they have outlined an approach to a just transition.

AIGCC noted that there is still no single, universally usable definition of what constitutes a just transition. The United Nations Development Programme says that it refers to “integrating social justice and equity principles, processes and practices in climate action.”

“In practice, many Asian decarbonisation and development plans address a just transition indirectly through reskilling, affordability, and access to social protection measures,” AIGCC said. “For investors, company engagement is the clearest near-term entry point, with integration into investment research and decision-making as the next step.”

INSIDE CLIMATE NEWS

[EPA Claims 'Overwhelming Rejection' of EVs as It Moves to Loosen Air Pollution Rules](#)

By: Anika Jane Beamer

A proposed rule would give auto manufacturers until 2029 to meet smog and particulate matter emissions standards while the agency reconsiders the requirements altogether.

After eliminating the electric vehicle tax credit, rolling back fuel economy standards and blocking California's stringent vehicle emissions rules, the Trump administration is now citing slowed electric vehicle growth as its rationale for loosening automobile air pollution standards.

In a rulemaking proposal released Friday, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced plans to delay the adoption of Biden-era Tier 4 air pollution standards for passenger cars and trucks and, going forward, to reconsider them.

The agency said that the proposed change is in response to "the overwhelming rejection of Electric Vehicles (EVs) by the American people and manufacturers shifting away from them." It comes amid debate over environmental regulation and the influence of industry interests in the Trump administration.

Established in April 2024, the Tier 4 Criteria Pollutant Standards represent the most recent batch of vehicle emissions standards adopted under the Clean Air Act. The standards would have required manufacturers to meet fleet-average limits on smog-producing volatile organic compounds, oxides of nitrogen (NOx) and particulate matter tailpipe emissions, with phase-in beginning in 2027.

When the standards were first adopted in 2024, electric vehicles accounted for 8 percent of new light-duty vehicles (cars, vans and trucks weighing less than 8,500 pounds) sold in the United States.

EV growth was projected to continue. But soon after President Donald Trump took office for his second term in January 2025, he initiated a series of deregulatory actions that stunted EV market growth.

On his first day in office, Trump moved to revoke California's special exemption from a rule barring states from enacting stricter air and climate pollution rules than the federal government. In June, he signed three Congressional Review Act resolutions officially blocking the state's stringent vehicle emissions standards.

With the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, Trump also set a September 2025 expiration date for federal tax credits for new and used EV sales. EV sales dropped sharply following the expiration of those credits, data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration shows.

Auto manufacturers are also poised to gain greater latitude following the reversal of the EPA's endangerment finding, a 2009 rule underpinning federal regulation of greenhouse gas emissions.

Despite the Trump administration's deregulatory actions in the auto sector and deliberate efforts to slow EV growth, the EPA has pinned the Tier 4 rule change on "faulty assumptions" about the industry by the Biden administration.

"In the intervening years since the Biden-Harris Administration established the 2024 Tier 4 emission standards, the assumptions about the trajectory of EVs have not come true," the agency wrote in a Friday press release. "This makes the Tier 4 standards unattainable for manufacturers and drives up the cost of vehicles as they try to comply."

Though the agency noted the federal government's role in shaping EV markets, mentioning the use of the Congressional Review Act to repeal "EV mandates," the rationale for the rule change seems to rest largely on apparent consumer disinterest.

"The American people have been very clear; they do not want EVs forced upon them," EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin said in a press release.

In a follow-up statement to Inside Climate News, the agency provided several examples of major automotive companies discontinuing EV lines months before the administration's regulatory decisions.

MANILA BULLETIN

[Hot days, rainy afternoons to persist nationwide — PAGASA](#)

By: Ellalyn De Vera-Ruiz

Despite the increasing occurrence of thunderstorms, hot weather remains the dominant condition in most parts of the country.

Scorching and humid conditions will continue across most of the country this week, although more areas may experience isolated afternoon or evening thunderstorms that could bring sudden heavy rains, the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) said on Monday, May 18.

PAGASA weather specialist Aldczar Aurelio said the Intertropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) continues to affect Southern Mindanao, while easterlies prevail over the Visayas and the rest of Mindanao.

Meanwhile, localized thunderstorms are affecting Luzon as daytime heat causes rain clouds to form.

The ITCZ is bringing cloudy skies with scattered rains and thunderstorms over Zamboanga Peninsula, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, Davao Region, and Soccsksargen, where moderate to, at times, heavy rains may trigger flash floods or landslides.

Aurelio said the ITCZ is expected to continue affecting Mindanao until Tuesday, May 19, before gradually moving away from the country by Wednesday, May 20.

By then, easterlies, or warm and humid winds from the Pacific Ocean, are expected to become the dominant weather system nationwide.

Despite the increasing occurrence of thunderstorms, Aurelio said hot weather remains the dominant condition in most parts of the country.

“Asahan ang maganda at maaliwalas na panahon sa natitirang bahagi ng bansa pero mataas ang chance na magkaroon ng thunderstorm sa hapon o sa gabi na kung saan nagdadala ito ng biglaang buhos na ulan (Generally fair weather is expected in most parts of the country, but there remains a high chance of afternoon or evening thunderstorms that may bring sudden downpours),” Aurelio said.

High heat index levels continued to be recorded nationwide on Sunday, May 17, with Dagupan City, Pangasinan; Baler, Aurora; Sangley Point, Cavite; and Cuyo, Palawan all reaching 45 degrees Celsius.

In Metro Manila, the heat index ranged from 40 to 43 degrees Celsius.

For Monday, PAGASA forecast a heat index of up to 45 degrees Celsius in Coron and Cuyo in Palawan, as well as San Jose, Occidental Mindoro.

Metro Manila may experience heat index levels ranging from 40 to 42 degrees Celsius. PAGASA classifies heat index values between 42 and 51 degrees Celsius under the “danger” category, as prolonged exposure may cause heat cramps, heat exhaustion, or heat stroke.

Aurelio added that there is no low-pressure area or tropical cyclone being monitored inside or outside the Philippine Area of Responsibility as of Monday.

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

[ITCZ, easterlies to bring rains across PH Tuesday – Pagasa](#)

By: Isabelle Pechay

MANILA, Philippines — The Intertropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ), easterlies, and localized thunderstorms will bring rains across the country on Tuesday, according to the state weather bureau.

In its latest forecast, the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (Pagasa) said the ITCZ, a weather system formed by the convergence of winds from the northern and southern hemispheres, continues to affect southern Mindanao.

Meanwhile, the easterlies prevail over the Visayas and localized thunderstorms affect Luzon.

Pagasa weather specialist Veronica Torres said thunderstorms, particularly in the afternoon and evening, may persist over much of the country in the coming days.

“These weather conditions are expected to continue at least in the next three to five days,” Torres, speaking Filipino, said in Pagasa’s latest briefing.

However, cloudy skies with scattered rains and thunderstorms are expected this Tuesday.

The ITCZ will bring overcast skies with scattered rains and thunderstorms over the Zamboanga Peninsula, Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, Soccsksargen, Davao Oriental, and Davao Occidental.

Moreover, Metro Manila and the rest of Luzon are forecast to have partly cloudy to cloudy skies with isolated rainshowers triggered by localized thunderstorms.

The easterlies will affect Visayas and the rest of Mindanao bringing partly cloudy to cloudy skies with isolated rainshowers or thunderstorms.

Pagasa also said no low pressure area or tropical cyclone is currently being monitored within or near the country’s area of responsibility. /jpv

THE MANILA TIMES

[UN General Assembly to take up climate change 'obligations' resolution](#)

The UN General Assembly on Wednesday will weigh a draft resolution underlining states' obligations to combat climate change, a long-awaited move that has been scaled back under pressure from major greenhouse gas emitters.

In 2024, the small Pacific island nation of Vanuatu spearheaded the General Assembly's request for an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the responsibility of states to fulfill their climate commitments.

The world's top court last year ruled that states were obliged to tackle climate change under international law, and failing to do so would pave the way for "reparations" to vulnerable countries.

The decision exceeded climate advocates' expectations, and Vanuatu in January proposed a new draft resolution to implement the ICJ ruling, which is nonbinding but can be drawn on by courts around the world.

"For Vanuatu and for many climate-vulnerable states, this is ultimately about survival, but it is also about something wider: whether multilateralism can still respond to reality with unity," said Ralph Regenvanu, Vanuatu's climate minister and a proponent of the cause for several years.

The text was altered significantly after negotiations among states, with climate change taking a back seat to national security or industrial interests in many countries.

The resolution welcomed the ICJ opinion "as an authoritative contribution to the clarification of existing international law" and calls on states to "comply with their respective obligations" to protect the global climate.

It also emphasized the measures needed to keep global warming limited to 1.5 C above pre-industrial levels, particularly "transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems" in keeping with a goal adopted by nearly 200 countries during a global climate meeting in Dubai in 2023.

However, the creation of an "International Register of Damage" to compile evidence of "damage, loss or injury attributable to climate change" has vanished from the current text, an initial draft of which was viewed by Agence France-Presse (AFP).

'Perseverance'

The register idea sparked backlash from the United States, China, the European Union, Japan and multiple oil-producing nations that argued it went beyond the ICJ opinion, diplomatic sources told AFP.

The countries most responsible for greenhouse gas emissions also regularly oppose any mechanism that could require them to pay reparations to nations at greatest risk of devastating impacts from climate change.

"Let me also be clear about what the resolution does not do. It does not create new legal obligations. It does not adjudicate disputes. It does not attribute responsibility to any state," Regenvanu said, describing the text as "a careful and balanced response to the Court's guidance."

Despite the watered-down draft, the resolution is unlikely to be adopted by the consensus seen in 2024, according to diplomatic sources, who expect at least one state to call for a vote on the matter.

Joie Chowdhury, a senior attorney at the Center for International Environmental Law, said the current version of the resolution was "still a strong text, and it really matters that it passes."

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

[WHO launches the “Climate and Health Co-benefits Challenge” showcasing climate interventions saving lives](#)

With support from The Rockefeller Foundation and the Pathfinder Initiative, a new open call invites governments, researchers and organizations to submit real-world evidence of climate action delivering measurable health gains, ahead of COP31.

The World Health Organization (WHO) Asia-Pacific Centre for Environment and Health in the Western Pacific under the WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific, with support from The Rockefeller Foundation and the Pathfinder Initiative, today launched the Climate and Health Co-benefits Challenge. The Challenge is an open call to governments, academic institutions, civil society, the private sector and international agencies to submit evidence of climate interventions outside the health sector that are already delivering measurable benefits for health and well-being.

The Challenge – unveiled on the sidelines of the Seventy-ninth World Health Assembly in Geneva – responds to a critical gap: while the health benefits of ambitious climate action are well recognized in theory, documented real-world examples often remain disconnected from decision-making and funding processes.

At a moment when stronger climate action is needed, the Challenge aims to demonstrate that the smartest climate investments – implemented at scale – are already improving health outcomes and saving lives.

What the Challenge is asking for

Submissions are invited from any sector where climate mitigation or adaptation action has generated demonstrable health co-benefits. These include energy, transport, agriculture and land use, oceans, urban planning, industry and nature-based solutions.

The Challenge will showcase examples of climate investments from around the world that are improving health and wellbeing. Some examples include shifts to renewable energy resulting in improved air quality; urban greening that keeps neighbourhoods cool during record heatwaves; and transitioning to sustainable diets, thereby lowering the rates of preventable disease.

Selected case studies will be highlighted at Pre-COP31 in Fiji in October this year and used to inform climate and health policy and investment decisions worldwide.

After the call, strong submissions will be selected for further development through evaluation of investment readiness, opportunities for replication across contexts and countries, and inclusion in broader evidence platforms.

Why this matters now

The WHO Global Action Plan on Climate Change and Health and the Belém Health Action Plan adopted at COP30 set an ambitious agenda for integrating health into climate action.

The Challenge is a direct response: a practical mechanism to connect what is already working with the decision-makers who have the power to position health as a compelling narrative for climate investment.

How to apply

Case study submissions will open on 18 May and run until 31 August 2026.

Case studies can be submitted [here](#).

Quotes

“Clean energy, sustainable transport, resilient food systems: these investments save lives today, and prepare us for tomorrow. That is why we are calling on governments and organizations across our Region and beyond: share your examples, your best practices, your stories.” – Dr Saia Ma’u Piukala, WHO Regional Director for the Western Pacific

“Communities are already benefiting from the transition to clean energy - providing cleaner air, improving health outcomes, and reducing energy bills. Supporting healthy communities is also one of the best ways to become more resilient to climate change.” – Hon Kate Thwaites, Australian Government Special Envoy for Climate Change Resilience and Adaptation

"Climate action is one of the most powerful investments we can make in human health. This Challenge will make that case with real evidence, from real places, affecting real people, on the road towards COP31." – Dr Sandro Demaio, Director, WHO Asia-Pacific Centre for Environment and Health in the Western Pacific

Key facts on climate and health co-benefits

The Western Pacific Region faces an escalating climate crisis with direct impacts on people’s health. Extreme heat, changing rainfall, rising sea levels, and increasingly frequent and severe weather events are driving displacement, food and water insecurity, chronic disease, heat-related illnesses and infectious disease risks.

Health co-benefits are positive, sometimes secondary or unintended, health outcomes generated by effective, evidence-based climate actions.

When climate actions are designed with health in mind, sectors such as transport, energy and urban development can deliver stronger returns on investment and greater social impact.

Climate investments are already saving lives. Accounting for health co-benefits strengthens the case for action, makes outcomes tangible for communities and policy-makers, and increases public value for every dollar invested.

About WHO ACE

The WHO Asia-Pacific Centre for Environment and Health in the Western Pacific is based in Seoul, Republic of Korea, and falls under the WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific in Manila, Philippines. It supports countries and areas in the Region in addressing the health impacts of climate change and environmental risks, and in building resilient, sustainable health systems.

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