EL NIÑO: COUNTYWIDE PREPARATION FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Ready LA County

What is El Niño?

El Niño is a naturally occurring climate pattern that increases the likelihood of wetter, stormier winters in Southern California. It is one phase of a recurring climate cycle driven by warmer-than-normal ocean temperatures in the central and eastern tropical Pacific Ocean. These changing weather patterns can increase the frequency and intensity of Pacific storms reaching California.

How will El Niño affect Los Angeles County?

A strong El Niño winter can bring periods of heavier rainfall, back-to-back storms, localized flooding, flash floods, debris flows, mudslides and coastal impacts. While El Niño does not guarantee a wet winter, it raises the odds of heavy storms, so it's important to be prepared.

Has LA County experienced El Niño before?

Yes. LA County has experienced strong El Niño winters in the past. During the 1982-83 and 1997-98 El Niño events, some parts of the county received more than double their normal rainfall.

When does storm season begin, and how long does it last?

Storm season officially begins mid-October and typically lasts through early spring, though the timing and intensity of storms can vary from year to year. During an El Niño year, Southern California often experiences wetter conditions and a greater likelihood of strong, sustained storms — which can mean heavier rain, flooding, mudflows and other impacts.

What is the County doing to prepare for winter storms?

Flood Protection

Los Angeles County Public Works prepares our flood protection facilities for the worst possible storms every year. Public Works crews inspect dams and channels, remove debris and sediment from reservoirs, maintain storm drains and pump stations and ensure flood control facilities are ready before winter storms arrive. For example, between July 2024 and June 2025, Public Works removed 3.5 million cubic yards (enough to fill SoFi Stadium around 1.5 times) of sediment and debris from reservoirs in preparation for the winter season.

The County maintains one of the nation's most comprehensive flood control systems, including dams, reservoirs, debris basins, spreading basins, channels, storm drains and pump stations. These facilities work together to reduce flood risks and help protect lives, property and critical infrastructure.

Emergency Coordination & Planning

The Office of Emergency Management leads countywide readiness by coordinating and supporting the countywide planning process, conducting hazard and operational assessments, holding Emergency Management Council and Operational Area Coordination meetings, developing Concept of Operations plans, coordinating efforts to protect critical facilities and conducting a countywide tabletop exercise.

Fire & Rescue Response

The Los Angleles County Fire Department scales its response to the forecast. Before the storm, it stages sandbags and sand at fire stations and conducts training and joint exercises. It draws on forecast inputs including NWS watches/warnings, Public Works mud and debris flow forecasts,

Unified Command Group (UCG) meetings and augments staffing scaled to the forecasted risk level. The department also maintains active patrol of waterways, beaches, flood-prone and burn-scar areas, with coordinated response across Public Works, Sheriff, OEM and local government.

Public Safety & Evacuations

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department focuses on pre-storm planning and resource positioning, evacuation and life-safety operations, protecting vulnerable communities and burn scar areas, roadway and flood response, emergency coordination and specialized resources and public information and department readiness.

Coastal & Marina Protection

The Department of Beaches & Harbors takes a three-part approach to prepare, protect and preserve the coastline. Ahead of storms, it reduces risk through seasonal sand berm construction, lifeguard tower relocations and Marina del Rey inspections and maintenance. When coastal hazards emerge, it responds with Point Dume emergency response, emergency revetment installation and interagency coordination. To safeguard the coastline's future, it invests in the Coastal Resilience Initiative, living shorelines and sand replenishment projects.

Support for Unhoused Neighbors

Homeless Services & Housing is protecting unhoused neighbors by identifying accessible emergency interim housing sites countywide, developing a plan to distribute emergency supplies, finalizing activation procedures for unsheltered response and establishing housing capacity pathways including motel vouchers and augmented emergency shelters.

Support for Older Adults & People with Disabilities

In partnership with the Aging & Disabilities Department, the County is working to ensure older adults and people with disabilities, who may face heightened risk during extreme weather, have the resources and support they need to prepare and stay safe.

Which County agencies are involved in storm preparedness and response?

Preparing for El Niño is a coordinated, countywide effort under the leadership of the Board of Supervisors and involves Public Works, the Office of Emergency Management, the Fire Department, the Sheriff's Department, the Department of Beaches and Harbors, Homeless Services and Housing and numerous local, state and federal partners.

What are the most important steps I can take to prepare for storm season?

A little preparation goes a long way. Here are some simple steps to get started:

- Sign up for emergency alerts at ready.lacounty.gov.
- Make a family plan and prepare a multi-day supply kit.
- Check your vehicle's windshield wipers, tires and headlights.
- Know whether your area is at risk for mud or debris flows.
- Prepare your home and property before heavy rain:
    - Clean gutters, downspouts and storm drains.
    - Repair roof leaks before storm season starts.
    - Pick up sandbags before storms.
- Stay informed before and during storms.

How can I receive emergency alerts?

Sign up for Alert LA County and monitor NOAA Weather Radio for emergency notifications and weather information during storm events.

Should I consider flood insurance? How do I sign up?

Most people are eligible for flood insurance, but standard homeowners' insurance does not cover flood damage. It's a separate policy that can take at least 30 days to go into effect, so signing up early is critical. To enroll, contact your insurance agent or visit floodsmart.gov, FEMA's National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) site.

How can I prepare for heavy rain?

Taking a few simple steps before storms arrive can help protect your home or property. Clear gutters, downspouts and nearby storm drains of leaves and debris. Inspect your roof for leaks and take steps to reduce potential water damage before storms arrive. You can also use the Public Works Sandbags Dashboard to find nearby sandbag distribution locations.

I live near a hillside or recent burn area. What should I do?

If you live near a hillside, canyon or recent burn area, it's especially important to prepare for mud and debris flows, as these areas carry a higher risk during heavy storms. Before storms arrive, place sandbags at vulnerable entry points, board up windows and direct potential flows away from structures rather than attempting to dam them. Residents can also monitor mudflow and debris flow forecasts through Los Angeles County Public Works. For property-specific preparedness steps, residents can call (800) 933-0930 to speak to a Public Works engineer.

What should I do during a storm?

Stay informed through official sources and emergency alerts. Steer clear of hazards such as downed power lines and flooded areas and never drive or walk through flooded roadways. Watch for mud and debris flows, and if you observe rising water or moving mud, move to higher ground.

How can I help my community prepare?

Check on neighbors, older adults, people with disabilities and others who may need assistance preparing for severe weather or recovering after a storm. Community preparedness helps improve safety and resilience for everyone.

Where can I learn more?

Visit ready.lacounty.gov to stay aware of emergencies and access storm preparedness resources before and during a storm.