October 2026

El Niño Winter: Preparing Now for Flood, Snow, and Wind

Federal forecasters expect one of the strongest El Niño events on record this winter. For Nevada public entities the forecast is not a prediction for any one county; it is a reason to act now. This report summarizes what the forecast does and does not say for Nevada, what existing law already requires, six low-cost actions a member can complete before the first large storm, and how the Enterprise Risk Management Excellence Program already assesses these exposures.

Why This Matters Now

On October 8, 2026, NOAA's Climate Prediction Center reported that El Niño is still strengthening, with a greater than 83 percent chance of a strong to very strong event through March 2027. The same discussion gives an 83 percent chance that the October to December period will exceed the strength of every El Niño on record since 1950, and adds NOAA's own caution: an event of this size makes El Niño-type impacts more likely, but does not guarantee them.

NOAA's August drought status update for California and Nevada notes that two of the three strongest El Niño events since 1950 produced extreme wet conditions across both states, while the third, in 2015-16, was near normal. Nevada's State Climatologist and the regional climatologist told The Nevada Independent in September that strong El Niños have had variable effects here and that past events may not be a good guide. Southern Nevada is historically the more likely to run wet. Northern Nevada is a wildcard.

Starting conditions matter as much as the forecast. As of late August, 88 percent of Nevada was in drought, and the state enters winter with fresh burn scars. The Hawk Fire burned more than 30 structures on the edge of Reno in August, and the lightning-sparked Grapevine and Kane Springs fires burned more than 43,000 acres in the mountains around Caliente in June. Caliente sits where Clover Creek meets Meadow Valley Wash, and a January warm-up and rain in 2005 destroyed about 60 homes there, portions of State Route 317, and the railroad. The National Weather Service warns that recent burn areas are prone to flooding, debris flows, and rock falls; that plugged culverts and debris over roads are common in moderate rain; and that damaging flows can follow 15 minutes or less of heavy rain. A wet winter brings rain-on-snow flooding, roof snow loads, and washouts; a dry one extends drought and fuel.

Either way, the exposures are the ones a member already owns: (1) its drainage, (2) its roofs, (3) its roads and fleet, and (4) the plans it is required to keep.

What Existing Law Already Requires

Local emergency planning. Each county must, and each city may, establish a local organization for emergency management with an appointed director. NRS 414.090. Each city and county must adopt and maintain a response plan, review it at least once each year, and, not later than December 31, file either the revised plan or a written certification that the plan on file is current with the Office of Emergency Management and each response agency that serves it. The plan must include (1) approved evacuation routes, (2) the location and inventory of emergency response equipment, and (3) plans for continuity of operations. NRS 239C.250. The 2025 Legislature moved the former Division of Emergency Management into the Office of the Governor as the Office of Emergency Management, so a plan or ordinance that still names the Division should be corrected at the next annual review. NRS 414.0375; NRS 239C.067. Both chapters define political subdivision as a city or county, so a special district is not itself required to file, but it should know where it fits in the county plan and coordinate with the county's local organization before a storm.

Emergency powers and immunity. NRS 414.110 declares emergency management activities to be governmental functions and provides that neither the entity nor, except in cases of willful misconduct, gross negligence, or bad faith, a worker complying with the chapter is liable for resulting death, injury, or property damage. Whether a particular activity falls within the chapter is a question for entity counsel. Outside the chapter, NRS 41.032 immunizes discretionary decisions, such as whether to close a road or when to plow, but not operational execution, such as how a culvert was maintained or how a washout was signed. Flood and snow claims against public entities are usually operational claims.

What Member Entities Should Do

Six Actions Before the First Storm

1. Confirm the plans you already keep are current and filed.
2. Walk the water before it arrives.
3. Winterize buildings and know your roofs.
4. Get fleet and crews ready.
5. Document the baseline now.
6. Test communications.

Confirm the plans you already keep are current and filed. Cities and counties should calendar the December 31 filing now and confirm the response plan addresses flood, winter storm, and burn-scar debris flow, and contains the provisions required by NRS 414.095 (pets and service animals) and NRS 414.099 (artificial intelligence). Every member, including special districts, should review its emergency operations plan and continuity of operations plan this fall and confirm the hazard mitigation plan it relies on is less than five years old, since a plan older than that ends eligibility for federal mitigation project grants. 44 C.F.R. § 201.6.

Walk the water before it arrives. Inspect and clear inlets, culverts, channels, and detention basins, and log the inspection. Identify every burn scar upstream of an entity road, facility, or utility asset and treat those drainages as the priority. Pre-position barricades, road-closed signage, and sandbags where crews can reach them, and agree with the county emergency manager on who closes what and who tells the public.

Winterize buildings and know your roofs. Put the entity's weatherization and winterization procedure into effect and work through the property, roof, and walkway checklists in ***POOL/PACT's Winterization Alert***, available in the member portal Resource Library and from

Risk Management. Confirm the design snow load of each occupied building and who decides when drifted snow comes off. Rain on snow sharply increases roof load. FEMA's Snow Load Safety Guide lists the warning signs of an overstressed roof, including sagging ceiling tiles or sprinkler lines, popping or cracking noises, and doors that no longer close; if any appear, evacuate and call for a structural inspection. On the same walkthrough, secure anything that could become windborne and note hazard trees near buildings and walkways.

Get fleet and crews ready. Have every employee who drives in winter conditions complete the Winter Driving course in POOL/PACT's On-demand Learning Program before the first storm. Inspect chains, tires, and plow equipment now, and enforce high-visibility garments for crews working in or near traffic. Hold plowing, sanding, and hauling vendors to the contractor oversight terms in the Winterization Alert, and confirm crews sent to remote sites can be reached.

Document the baseline now. Photograph and date the condition of roofs, drainage structures, roads, and equipment yards before winter, and keep inspection and corrective-action records in one place. That record shows operational care if a claim is filed and supports any later cost recovery request.

Test communications. Confirm and test a backup means of reaching staff and the public if power or network service fails. Enroll key personnel in alerts from the National Weather Service office that serves the county, and pre-draft road and facility closure notices. Appropriate policies still need to be in place, irrespective of the activity.

ERMEP Assesses This Exposure

The Enterprise Risk Management Excellence Program asks these questions already. ***The Risk Management section*** asks whether the entity has an emergency operations plan and a continuity of operations plan, each reviewed annually, and a current weatherization and winterization procedure with water sensors in high-value buildings. ***The Public Works section*** asks whether the entity keeps a written inspection and maintenance schedule for its storm and flood water infrastructure and a flood response plan; whether it has evaluated its facilities for high wind and severe weather and secures materials that could become windborne; and whether it has backup communications. ***The Fleet and Transportation section*** asks whether staff who drive have completed the Winter Driving course. A member that has worked through those sections has already addressed the exposure this report describes, and every hardened member strengthens the pool.

POOL/PACT Resources and Contact

POOL/PACT Risk Management can assist member entities with emergency operations and continuity plan review, facility walkthroughs, winterization questions, vendor contract review, and ERMEP engagement. The Risk Management Grant program is available for qualifying risk reduction purchases. For more information, please contact marshallsmith@poolpact.com or jarrodhickman@poolpact.com.

The Risk on the Horizon Report *is a monthly advisory published by POOL/PACT Risk Management for POOL/PACT members. Each issue provides timely, actionable guidance on a single risk topic tied to seasonal patterns, regulatory changes, or emerging threats.*

The information presented in this Risk on the Horizon Report is not legal advice. Member entities with questions about emergency planning or flood and winter storm preparedness should contact their entity counsel prior to taking action, amending, or implementing policies based on this report.