

How Can California's Water Suppliers Prepare for the Coming El Niño

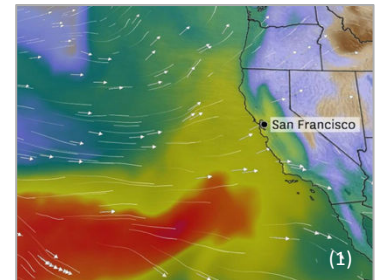
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California Governor Gavin Newsom recently [declared a preemptive state of emergency for California](#) to mobilize resources ahead of a [potentially historic El Niño this winter](#). State and federal forecasts indicate that the developing event could become “exceptionally strong,” with an increased likelihood of [wetter-than-normal conditions across much of California](#).

Among other actions, the Governor's declaration directs state agencies to strengthen flood risk reduction efforts, stage flood fighting equipment, and prepare communities and critical infrastructure for severe winter weather. It also provides a timely reminder that periods of high runoff can present opportunities to [capture and store water for future use](#), including through groundwater recharge and other conjunctive use strategies.

For California's water suppliers, the message is two-fold. First and foremost, emergency preparedness must take priority: protecting the public, the environment, and critical infrastructure from flooding, debris flows, and other storm-related hazards. At the same time, suppliers can consider how their systems might safely take advantage of periods of excess water to improve long-term water supply reliability and bolster reserves for future drought years.

There is still time to prepare. California's rainy season has shifted in recent decades, with [research showing that its onset now generally occurs well into December](#). This article outlines several actions water suppliers can consider now, from reviewing operational flexibility and water rights to evaluating recharge opportunities and coordinating with regional partners, before this year's El Niño-driven wet season arrives.



Risk & Resilience Planning. EKI supports water suppliers with risk and resilience planning efforts, including the federally required Risk and Resilience Assessments (RRAs) and Emergency Response Plans (ERPs) under the [2018 America's Water Infrastructure Act](#). These efforts help identify system vulnerabilities to hazards such as flood and improve preparedness for emergency conditions. Water suppliers should confirm that their current RRA and ERP remain up to date and reflect current system risk and operations, and that staff are familiar with emergency procedures.

1. Prepare for Potential Emergency Measures

Water suppliers should prepare now for the possibility that severe storms will require emergency measures to remove debris, protect vulnerable infrastructure, and maintain service. This includes identifying locations susceptible to flooding, erosion, debris flows, washouts, or access limitations and coordinating with suppliers and contractors to purchase and stage critical materials and equipment, such as rip rap, sandbags, aggregate, pipe and fittings, pumps, generators, and excavation equipment.

Suppliers should also establish procedures for tracking and documenting emergency work, including labor, equipment, materials, contractor costs, work locations, damage photographs, field decisions, and daily activities. Consistent, contemporaneous documentation can support cost recovery and reimbursement efforts, including a FEMA Request for Public Assistance if a major disaster or emergency is declared.

Documentation and recordkeeping procedures should be incorporated into the utility's ERP, along with protocols for activating contractors, authorizing emergency expenditures, retaining receipts and invoices, and coordinating with local and state emergency-management partners. Preparing these systems in advance can help suppliers protect critical infrastructure during a storm while preserving records needed for potential post-disaster recovery.

2. Review Operational Flexibility of Existing System

Before this wet season begins, water suppliers should review their existing systems to understand where they have operational flexibility to capture, store/recharge, and/or convey additional water during high-flow periods. This can include evaluating available storage, groundwater recharge facilities, raw water conveyance facilities, system interties, and other infrastructure that could potentially be used when excess water becomes available.

Water suppliers should also identify the operational constraints that could limit their ability to take advantage of short-duration opportunities, considering for example:

- Are diversion facilities capable of operating at higher-than-normal inflows?
- How much conveyance capacity is available?
- Are recharge facilities maintained and ready for use?
- Can system operations be modified without affecting water quality, treatment reliability, environmental requirements, and/or service to customers?

Opportunities to capture excess water or adjust operations can develop quickly, and the limiting factor may not be water availability. Reviewing infrastructure, operating procedures, monitoring needs, and decision-making authority in advance can help suppliers respond when conditions permit rather than trying to resolve these questions during a storm event.

3. Understand Water Rights and Flood Recharge Diversion Opportunities

Having the physical ability to capture water does not necessarily mean a supplier has the [legal authority to do so](#). Water suppliers should review their existing water rights, contracts, permits, and other authorities to determine whether they allow additional diversions or storage during wet conditions and whether any operational, seasonal, place of use, purpose of use, or reporting limitations apply.

California also has several pathways specifically intended to facilitate groundwater recharge using high winter and flood flow events. Depending on the circumstances, recharge may occur under an existing water right, a temporary or longer-term water right permit, or [pursuant to California Water Code §1242.1](#) (during qualifying flood conditions).



Water Code §1242.1 provides a temporary statutory pathway (currently effective through January 1, 2029) for diversions of qualifying flood flows to groundwater recharge without having a water right, provided that specified conditions are satisfied. The provision was designed to provide the dual benefits of reducing flood impacts and replenishing depleted groundwater basins.

Water Code §1242.1 is not a general authorization to divert any and all winter flows. Rather, this statute is limited to locally declared flood conditions and governs allowable diversions and recharge, requirements to protect infrastructure and existing water users, and notification and reporting to the California State Water Resources Control Board and applicable Groundwater Sustainability Agency.

Water suppliers interested in potentially using this authority should review the requirements now and identify candidate diversion points, recharge areas, necessary equipment, monitoring procedures, and reporting responsibilities before flood conditions develop. Doing so can make the difference between having a theoretical recharge opportunity and being operationally prepared to use it.

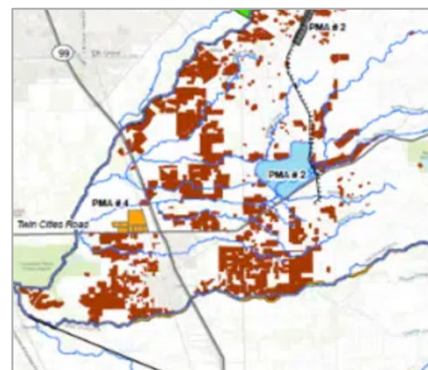
4. Coordinate with Regional Partners

Many of the best opportunities to capture wet-year water extend beyond any single water supplier's service area. Because surface water, groundwater basins, flood control systems, and conveyance infrastructure are inherently regional, taking advantage of high flow conditions may require coordination among multiple agencies.

Water suppliers should consider coordinating now with their applicable Groundwater Sustainability Agency (GSA), flood control district(s), neighboring water suppliers, counties, reservoir operators, and other entities that may control diversion, conveyance, recharge, and/or storage infrastructure. Early coordination can help identify where available water, infrastructure capacity, and groundwater recharge needs and opportunities overlap.

Regional discussions can also clarify operational roles before an event occurs, such as:

- Who monitors the hydrologic conditions that trigger specific actions (e.g., flood conditions and operations)?
- Who determines when flood flows are available for diversion?
- Who operates diversion or recharge facilities?
- How will diverted water be measured and reported?
- Where groundwater recharge provides a future water supply benefit, how will recharge and subsequent extraction be accounted for?



A wet winter can create opportunities that are difficult for any single agency to capture alone. Establishing these relationships and operating protocols in advance can allow agencies to respond more quickly and potentially turn short periods of excess runoff into longer-term regional water supply benefits.

Water suppliers interested in evaluating these or other wet year preparedness and water supply opportunities can contact EKI's Water Resources & Engineering team.

For more information, please contact:

Supply Systems Analysis,
Risk & Resilience Planning



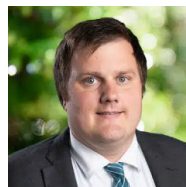
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