

# New spill factor: La Nina could add to storms

## Ocean system forming, adding to already high Gulf hurricane threat

**REUTERS** 

July 8, 2010  
updated 1 hour 25 minutes ago

NEW YORK — A La Nina weather pattern, the opposite of its more infamous cousin El Nino, will likely ramp up in July and August, potentially boosting hurricane formation in the Gulf of Mexico, the U.S. Climate Prediction Center forecast on Thursday.

"La Nina conditions are likely to develop during July-August 2010," the CPC, an office under the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, stated in its monthly update.

La Nina spawns colder-than-normal waters in the equatorial Pacific Ocean. In contrast, El Nino is an abnormal warming of those waters. Both wreak havoc in the weather from the U.S. to India and occur every three to four years.

The emergence of a La Nina is of particular concern to the oil industry in the Gulf, already reeling from the massive oil spill caused by a leaking BP well.

Several forecasters have said the number of hurricanes striking the United States increases sharply during La Nina years and shrinks when El Nino hits.

Increased wind shear in an El Nino tends to rip apart embryonic storms in the Atlantic basin and Caribbean Sea. But those winds are limited in a La Nina year, allowing storms to flourish.

Last May, NOAA predicted this Atlantic storm season could be the worst since the record-breaking 2005, when Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans, Hurricane Wilma slammed into Florida's citrus groves, and Hurricane Rita hit hard the oil rigs in the Gulf and refineries along the Gulf Coast.

NOAA forecast up to 23 named storms, of which 14 could power up to hurricanes. A record 15 hurricanes struck in 2005. June has already produced the first hurricane in 15 years, Alex, which dissipated in Mexico last weekend.

Storms are a particular concern in the Gulf, which holds about 27 percent of the U.S.'s oil and 15 percent of its natural gas, according to the federal Department of Energy.

### **Corn Belt could see dry spell**

La Nina also poses a threat to crops in the U.S. Midwest and in countries like agricultural powerhouses Brazil, Argentina and India.

For American farmers, La Nina increases the chance of a dry spell in the Corn Belt, especially during the critical pollination stage of the crop in July.

Rain is vital in this month for corn yields. And those showers are also needed in August for soybeans when they go into pod setting, which contains the beans and affects the yield of the crop.

The United States is the world's largest producer and exporter of corn and soybeans, and any production problem could lead to higher feed prices across the globe.

Worldwide, the effect of a La Nina would spread into countries like Brazil, one of the world's top agricultural powers, and India, a major producer and consumer of everything from sugar to oilseeds.

In a La Nina, CPC said drier-than-normal weather can occur from southern Brazil all the way to central Argentina during their winter.

Aside from sugar cane, that may also affect coffee production in Brazil, the world's top producer. The Latin American country is the world's second biggest exporter of soybeans. Argentina is the biggest exporter of soymeal and soyoil.

For Brazil, heavy rains during an El Nino in 2009 hampered the harvesting of its sugar cane. But this could turn into a prolonged dry spell as La Nina strengthens.

CPC said the Indian monsoon, which weakened in 2009 to its worst level in more than 30 years, tends to be greater than normal especially in the northwestern part of the country in a La Nina year.

In between, a La Nina tends to increase rainfall over Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and northern Australia. All these countries suffer from severe drought when an El Nino hits.

El Nino means "little boy" in Spanish and was named after the Christ child because it was first noticed by anchovy fishermen in Latin America around one Christmastime in the 19th Century.

The moderately strong El Nino of 2009 has just wound down and this La Nina is kicking up hard on its heels.

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