We'll soon get a glimpse of future temperatures, thanks to this record El Niño

It will act like a climate time machine, temporarily pushing temperatures to levels that otherwise might not be felt for a decade or so.

August 13, 2026 By Ben Noll

This year's record-smashing El Niño will do more than just shift and enhance patterns of heat, extreme rainfall and drought around the world.

It will also give the planet a preview of the late 2030s.

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That's because this El Niño will act like a climate time machine, temporarily pushing global temperatures to levels that might not otherwise be reached for another decade or so.

According to an analysis by climate scientist Zeke Hausfather that was shared with The Washington Post, there's around a 95 percent chance that 2027 will become Earth's hottest year on record — soaring past the last record in 2024 — because the combination of El Niño and climate change could spike global temperatures to around 1.76 degrees Celsius (3.17 degrees Fahrenheit) above preindustrial averages.

Described as "stunning" by Hausfather, who researches and analyzes the climate for Stripe, Carbon Brief and Berkeley Earth, this value would be so far above the warming trend of the past decade that it could bring global temperatures to levels not otherwise expected under that trend until around 2037.

"I'm not sure folks have realized just how crazy the second half of 2026 and 2027 will be for global temperatures — on the back of a record-smashing El Niño event," wrote Hausfather on X.

It's currently close to a coin flip whether 2026 would become the warmest year on record, according to Hausfather's analysis, which considers the average of several different temperature datasets. It's possible that 2026 sets a record in some, but not all, of these datasets.

Jim Hansen, director of the Program on Climate Science, Awareness and Solutions at Columbia University, said he expects 2026 to become the warmest year, but to hold that crown only until 2027 exceeds it.

There is a much stronger signal for record warmth in 2027 because increasing air temperatures caused by El Niño lag slightly behind increasing ocean temperatures.

A global temperature of 1.76 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels in 2027 would be about 0.29 degrees Celsius higher than what's expected based on the warming trend of the past decade.

According to Hausfather's temperature predictions for next year, the middle 50 percent of forecasts range from 1.67 degrees Celsius to 1.85 degrees Celsius above the preindustrial average.

At the high end of that range, global temperatures in 2027 would jump roughly 13 years ahead of the recent warming trend, reaching levels that might otherwise become typical around 2040. The low end would represent a 7-year-boost, to around 2034.

Hausfather said that this El Niño event is happening on top of a "strong acceleration in the rate of warming associated with continued emissions of greenhouse gases."

Both Hausfather and Hansen also mentioned that decreasing atmospheric aerosols — which have historically offset some warming — are contributing to the acceleration in warming.

Although Hausfather expects 2028 to be cooler than 2027, he added that "human emissions are adding a permanent El Niño worth of heat to the climate system each decade."

In other words, global temperatures in 2027 will take a big but temporary upward stairstep, and they are unlikely to permanently continue at or above those levels for now.

These temperature increases will also have consequences for atmospheric water vapor. Because the water vapor-carrying capacity of air increases at a rate of 7 percent per degree Celsius, it's possible — if not likely — that 2027 also sets a new global moisture record, surpassing 2024. In 2025, The Post mapped the planet's rising moisture zones and showed how they are closely connected to an increasing risk for rainfall extremes.

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The role of El Niño

This year's El Niño is predicted to peak in December, but its impacts will continue long into 2027. (Ben Noll/The Washington Post/ECMWF)

During El Niño, huge stores of ocean heat from the western Pacific spread eastward, eventually reaching the west coast of South America. Thunderstorm activity shifts with that warmth, transferring heat from the ocean and pumping it high into the atmosphere. Winds and atmospheric circulation then redistribute that heat beyond the tropical Pacific and around the globe, raising global temperatures.

That's why strong El Niño events often appear as an upward stairstep in long-term plots of global temperatures.

Ocean temperatures compared with average during the six strongest El Niño events on record before 2026. (Ben Noll/The Washington Post/NOAA)

But this El Niño isn't just going to be strong. Boosted by the planet's long-term warming trend, it's probably going to dwarf the six strongest that came before it in 2015, 1997, 1982, 1972, 1888 and 1877 — the latter contributing to a global famine that caused 3 to 4 percent of the global population to perish.

Ocean temperatures in the central equatorial Pacific, where El Niño's strength is measured, have already broken records for 75 days straight.

That streak isn't expected to end anytime soon.

Temperatures in the equatorial Pacific Ocean may surge more than 4.0 degrees Celsius above average (7.2 degrees Fahrenheit) by December, breaking the previous record by more than a degree Celsius.

The Post is tracking these records on a regular basis — and mapping the potentially significant weather ripple effects — in an El Niño tracker.

Those weather effects will vary from place to place.

But the temperature spike will briefly push the entire planet into its warmer future.

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