El Niño 2026 – Maritime Operational Impact

1. Introduction

El Niño is a naturally occurring climate phenomenon associated with periodic warming of sea surface temperatures in the central and eastern equatorial Pacific. It is a major systemic shock that goes far beyond a temporary weather shift. As Pacific Ocean temperatures surge, they disrupt global atmospheric circulation, triggering a cascading crisis that simultaneously impacts agriculture, energy grids, marine ecosystems, and public health worldwide.

A developing El Niño event (mid-2026 onward) is expected to increase weather volatility, constrain key shipping routes, and disrupt global supply chains.

According to a World Meteorological Organization (WMO) report of May 2026, sea surface temperature anomalies are increasing across the central-eastern equatorial Pacific, indicating an ongoing warming pattern that may support El Niño development.

This article points out the key risks to shipping operations and provides guidance on considerations to support effective planning.

2. Key Risks to Shipping Operations

There may be consequential risks to vessel operations that will require anticipation, assessment and mitigation. Key considerations include:

2.1 Voyage

i. Voyage plans may change at short notice
ii. Increased likelihood of deviation (Cape routing / longer passages)
iii. Greater scrutiny of voyage planning decisions, weather routing justification

2.2 Weather & Navigation Hazards

i. Increased extreme weather variability - storms / heavy rainfall in some regions / heatwaves in others
ii. Altered wind patterns
iii. Altered sea states and currents

iv. More frequent heavy weather routing adjustments

2.3 Vessel & Cargo

i. Increased risk of cargo shift / damage
ii. Structural stress
iii. Heavy weather incidents
iv. Higher fuel consumption due to deviations
v. Pressure to sail with sub-optimal loading conditions
vi. Greater scrutiny of cargo care records

2.4 Ports & Rivers

There is a likelihood of an impact on port operations in affected areas such as:

i. Draft restrictions, leading to reduced cargo intake
ii. Load planning constraints (especially under draft limits)
iii. Reduced productivity
iv. Scheduling conflicts
v. Congestion
vi. Longer waiting times at anchor
vii. Increased berth congestion and turnaround delays

2.5 Panama Canal

i. Draft restrictions → transit limitation → fewer transit slots → congestion
ii. Long waiting times / costly priority booking
iii. Canal bottlenecks → knock-on port delays globally

Note: The Panama Canal remains a high-risk chokepoint due to this phenomenon, with a strong likelihood of restrictions if drought conditions return. Previous El Niño events saw reduced transits and significant delays caused by reduced rainfall and lower water levels.

2.6 Claims

El Niño can act as a risk multiplier across several claim drivers such as:

i. Demurrage and detention
ii. Off hire and performance disputes
iii. Delay and deviation
iv. Weather-related cargo damage
v. Delay related cargo deterioration
vi. Improper stowage under time pressure

3. Recommendations

The following recommendations provide high-level guidance. Further in-depth analysis of trade specific factors should be considered.

3.1 Voyage Planning

i. Monitor canal advisories and slot availability closely
ii. Allow contingency time for:
    a. Canal delays
    b. Port congestion

iii. Plan for alternative routing scenarios

3.2 Navigation & Safety

i. Enhanced weather routing and forecasting
ii. Adjust course/speed early in anticipation of heavy weather
iii. Ensure vessel is fully battened down with cargo, deck equipment, fittings and openings properly secured

3.3 Cargo Care

i. Anticipate:
    a. Longer voyage durations
    b. Temperature / moisture impact
ii. Increase frequency of:
    a. Cargo inspections
    b. Ventilation checks (where applicable)

3.4 Documentation & Evidence

Maintain clear, detailed records of:

i. Weather conditions
ii. Routing decisions
iii. Delays and instructions received
iv. Ensure logbook accuracy (critical for claims defense)

4. Conclusion

Operators should be prepared for potential route changes, delays, and increased claims exposure, particularly where Panama Canal constraints and extreme weather variability intersect. Consideration may be given to lessons learnt from the previous events and available industry experience when evaluating the potential risks to the vessel operations, with appropriate mitigating measures incorporated at the planning stage to help minimise consequential losses arising from any disruption.

EL NIÑO IS NOT JUST WEATHER – IT IS A SYSTEM-WIDE DISRUPTION

Resources

WMO - El Niño / La Niña update - May 2026
WMO: Prepare for El Niño - 02 June 2026
Severe Weather Information Centre 3.0
Maritime Services - PanCanal.com
Workbook: GatunH2OIndicators

Supportive Information

For further information on this or other Loss Prevention topics please contact the Loss Prevention Department, Steamship Insurance Management Services Ltd.
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