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Public Information Statement 26-05
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From: Marina Timofeyeva, Supervisory Physical Scientist.

Subject: Public Information Statement Implementing a Relative Oceanic Niño Index effective February 1, 2026

The National Centers for Environmental Prediction (NCEP) Climate Prediction Center (CPC) informs the public of the shift to a Relative Oceanic Niño Index for the official monitoring and prediction of the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) phenomenon, effective February 1, 2026. ENSO is the leading pattern of year-to-year climate variability, and plays an important role in subseasonal to seasonal variations in temperature, precipitation, storm tracks, hurricane activity, and other impactful variables in the weather-climate system.

When implemented, NCEP CPC will define El Niño (La Niña) as a relative, positive (negative) mean SST anomaly of 0.5 degrees C or greater over 3 consecutive months in the Niño 3.4 region of the central Pacific Ocean (5 degrees N to 5 degrees S and 120 degrees W to 170 degrees W). This anomaly is computed by subtracting the average SST anomaly of the global tropics (20 degrees N to 20 degrees S) from the Niño 3.4 regional anomaly. After the subtraction, the relative index is rescaled to match the amplitude of the traditional index.

The Relative Oceanic Niño Index (RONI) is defined as the three month running average of the relative Niño 3.4 index. Historical El Niño and La Niña events will be categorized based on this index, specifically when there are five or more consecutive, overlapping three-month seasons where the RONI is greater than 0.5C (El Niño) or less than -0.5C (La Niña). The RONI is visually very similar to the traditional ONI, so users can use it in the same way as they would the traditional ONI.

This proposed change will have two primary benefits for ENSO monitoring and prediction: 1) the relative sea surface temperature index better identifies current and past El Niño and La Niña events because it is less sensitive to the chosen base climatology period. This allows for comparison of events across the lengthy climate record. 2) A relative index is more related to changes in rainfall over the tropical Pacific than the traditional index. Over the past year, the relative SST index was better aligned with the intensity of rainfall anomalies and circulation changes associated with the ENSO phenomenon. It is the change in tropical rainfall and heating that ultimately drives the

subseasonal to seasonal variations we see in the midlatitudes and over the United States.

The content of the ENSO Diagnostic Discussion (EDD) will be updated as needed to utilize the relative index, and the ENSO Alert System will likewise reflect the relative index.

Importantly, the legacy Niño 3.4 and Oceanic Niño Index files will continue to be updated for users that require that continuity. Therefore, there would be minimal impact expected, and no legacy data files or web links would be changed at the time of implementation.

The following is a text file of the RONI:
https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/data/indices/RONI.ascii.txt

The following is a text file containing the monthly relative Niño 3.4 index used to calculate the RONI:
https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/data/indices/Rnino34.ascii.txt

The following is a figure showing the difference between the legacy ONI and RONI, and their respective time series, from 1950 to present:
https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/analysis_monitoring/enso_update/compare_RONI_ONI.png

For more information on the EDD and the ENSO Alert System, please see the update Product Description:
http://nsdesk.servicenowservices.com/api/g_noa/nwspc/res2/bf8d1d868734ead44b0fa8a60cbb359e

Please provide questions to the following contacts:

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