

Philippines braces for another El Niño hit

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The Philippines is intensifying its preparedness measures amid growing concerns over a potential "super" El Niño event later this year, even as rising fuel prices continue to push up farm input and production costs. The Department of Agriculture (DA) has sounded a note of caution, underscoring that while the return of El Niño conditions appears increasingly likely, the key uncertainty lies in its severity and impact on the country's already vulnerable farm sector.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. emphasised that the nation must prepare for a range of scenarios following the damaging effects of the 2024 El Niño episode, which had significantly weakened rice production. According to projections from the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (Pagasa), there is a high probability—estimated at over 90 percent—of a moderate to strong El Niño developing in the final quarter of 2026.

Further amplifying these concerns, insights from global climate models indicate the possibility of a more extreme event. Officials from the Philippine Rice Research Institute have pointed to scenarios where temperature anomalies could rise sharply, potentially triggering a "super" El Niño. Such conditions are expected to suppress rainfall and place considerable strain on water resources across major agricultural regions.

In response, the DA has initiated a series of proactive measures aimed at mitigating potential disruptions. Programme managers under the Masagana Rice Industry Development Program have been directed to prepare contingency plans, including the promotion of less water-intensive crops such as mung beans, adjustments to planting schedules, and the accelerated deployment of solar-powered irrigation systems. Close coordination with the National Irrigation Administration is also underway to optimise water allocation and ensure the operational readiness of irrigation infrastructure during prolonged dry spells.

These preparations come at a time when the agriculture sector is still recovering from recent setbacks. Official data indicate that the sector contracted in 2024, reflecting the combined impact of adverse weather events, disease outbreaks, and structural challenges. Crop and livestock subsectors bore the brunt of these pressures, with substantial economic losses recorded over the year.

Despite these headwinds, certain segments of the agri-economy are showing resilience. Industry representatives have indicated that sugar supply remains stable, supported by higher inventory levels that have offset declines in production. This offers a degree of reassurance in terms of domestic supply stability, even as broader uncertainties persist.

As climate risks intensify and input costs remain elevated, the focus is now shifting towards adaptive strategies and resource optimisation. The government's evolving response reflects a broader recognition that resilience in agriculture will increasingly depend on proactive planning, technological interventions, and efficient resource management.