A super El Niño winter is coming and the first official forecast is in

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This winter is set to feature numerous strong storms affecting the West Coast and southern half of the country, according to the official winter outlook released Thursday by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The outlook is dominated by the influence of the near-record strong El Niño event.

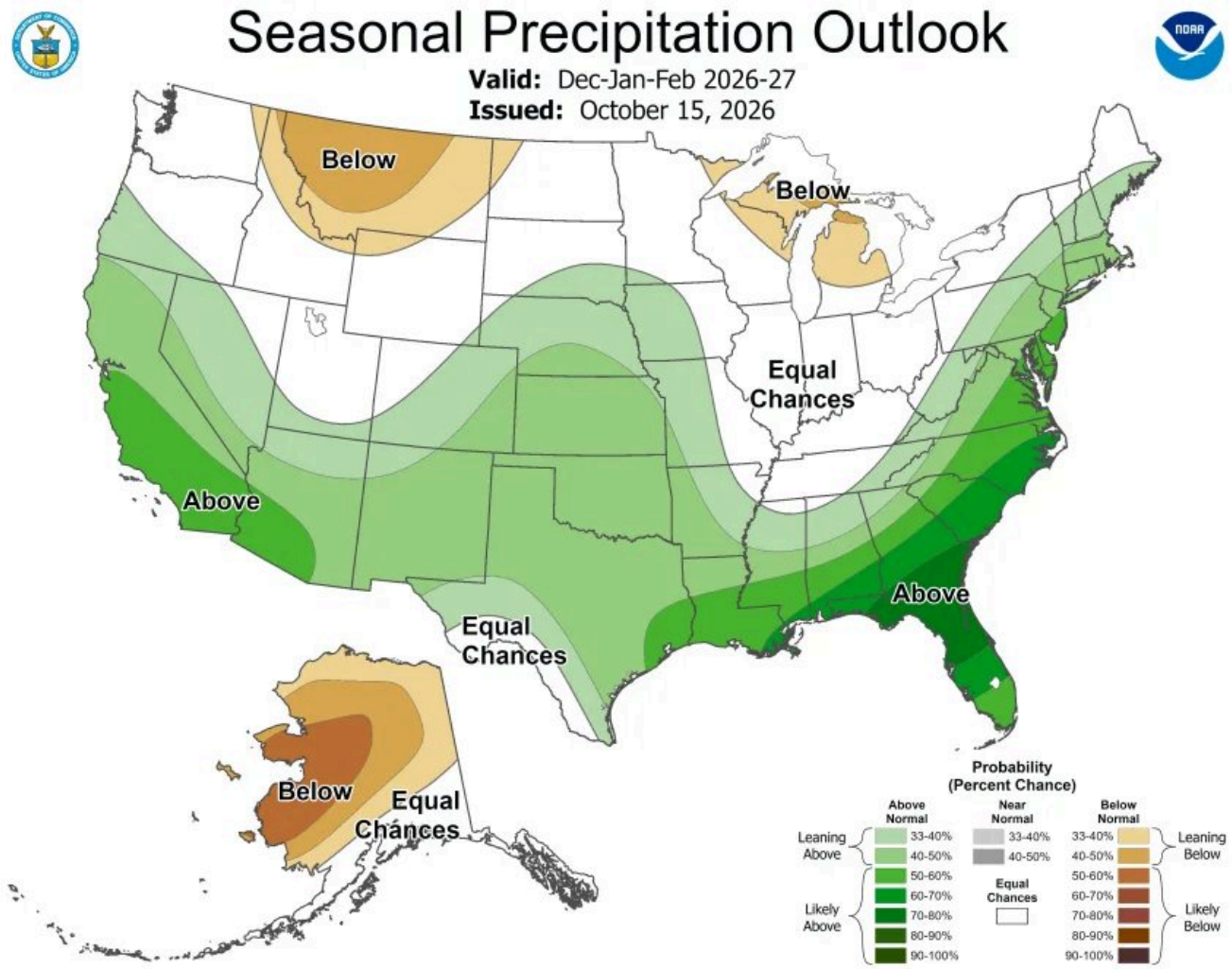
El Niño, which is characterized by above-average ocean temperatures in the tropical Pacific that lead to a domino effect of shifts in weather patterns around the globe, is likely to peak in intensity in December but make its mark throughout the winter months across the Lower 48 states.

Given the influence of El Niño this winter, much of the country is expected to be milder and wetter than average, though not necessarily less snowy than is typical, according to NOAA forecasters.

Wintry mix for the southern states

Given the near-record intensity of the current El Niño and record-warm ocean temperatures globally, there is the potential for any winter storms to bring unusually heavy rains and mountain snows to the regions that lie in their path.

Warmer waters enable greater evaporation, and warmer air can carry more moisture, thereby providing storms with added moisture to work with as they strike land and move across the country.



While no two strong El Niño winters are the same, most have temperature and precipitation trends in common. That's because El Niño typically pointsthe jet stream — the west-to-east flowing, cross-country river of air that steers storms — at the southern tier of the US.

The result tends to be more storms and wetter and cooler weather in southern portions of the country, while northern states turn drier and milder than average, according to NOAA. (Yes, snow-loving Northeasterners, that typically means less snow on average during strong El Niño winters, especially in inland areas.)

However, NOAA meteorologist Jon Gottschalck said that some of the storms along the southern tier may turn northeast along the East Coast, potentially bringing heavy rain and snow to the big cities of the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast, depending on the availability of cold air. "These storms could be very strong," Gottschalck said.

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In addition to above-average precipitation projected for the West Coast and across the southern states, precipitation along the eastern seaboard is also expected to be above average.

Across the Southeast and parts of the southern Plains, where El Nino's cooler trend and increased precipitation set the table for snow, sleet and freezing rain. Exactly how much frozen precipitation these areas see will depend on how cold it gets, and whether the cold air coincides with storms.

Although El Niño is likely to be the dominant player influencing winter weather, it is not the only game in town. Other players, such as the polar vortex, will also influence how much cold air and snow falls, especially along the northern tier of the country.

A wet winter likely in California

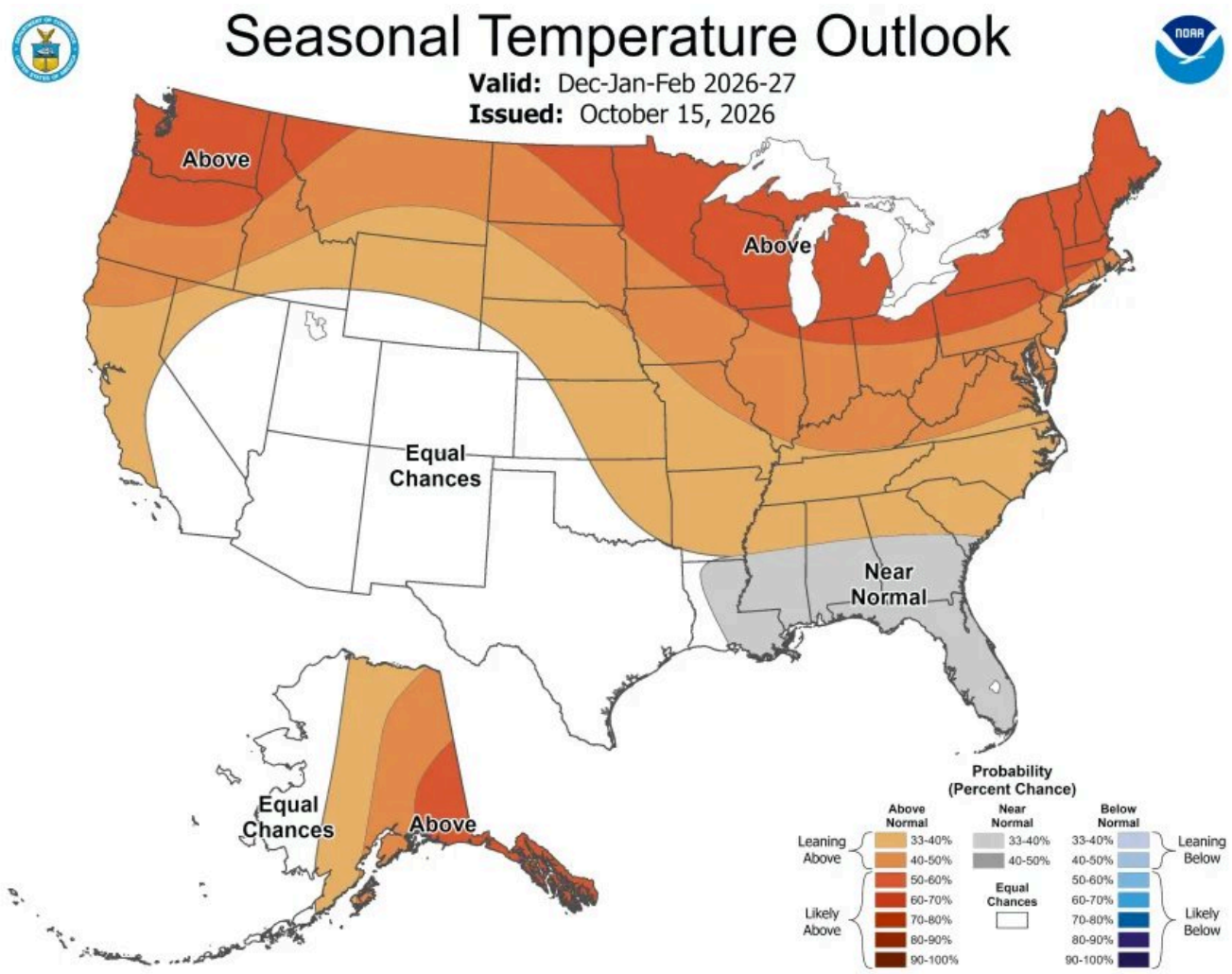
California could be hit hard by this El Niño, as reliable seasonal computer model projections are showing the state could see far above-average precipitation for the winter.

Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom has already declared a state of emergency in the run-up to the El Niño winter, given the potential for significant inland flooding, high winds, heavy mountain snow and coastal flooding from waves riding on top of unusually high tides during any major storms.

History has shown that strong El Niños are no guarantee of an unusually wet California winter, but that they do tilt the odds in favor of such an outcome. And El Niño events can be particularly damaging there. A super El Niño in 1997 to 1998 set seasonal rainfall records across the Golden State and caused widespread flooding and mudslides.

"While higher chances of rain and snow may bring relief to drought-afflicted areas, too much precipitation on dry soil can fuel destructive flash floods and mudslides. Now is the time for communities and individuals to plan ahead for the upcoming winter," Ken Graham, director of the National Weather Service, said in a statement.

Half the country warmer than normal



El Niño also has an influence on severe thunderstorms, which after peaking in spring, normally pick up steam again near and along the Gulf Coast from late fall to early winter.

El Niño puts Florida at a particularly higher risk of them during the winter. The script flips in other parts of the Gulf Coast, which are less active than normal, according to Michael Tippett, a climate scientist at Columbia University.

Notably, warmer-than-normal temperatures are possible over more than half of the Lower 48. El Niño can't be blamed for everything — a world warming due to fossil fuel pollution is always playing a role. Winter is the fastest-warming season for most of the US, according to an analysis from the non-profit research group Climate Central.

The areas forecast to be drier than normal aren't quite perfectly in sync with El Niño, but they are confined to the northern tier, where it is also expected to be milder than average. And unusually warm and dry is not the combination that will produce snow.

As with winter temperatures, research shows a warming climate has also impacted snowfall over the decades. Annual snow amounts have dropped in nearly two-thirds of the US since 1970, according to Climate Central.

Only time will tell just how wintry this winter will be, but El Niño will almost certainly be a main player alongside our warming climate.