



MRCC
Midwestern Regional Climate Center
<http://mrcc.isws.illinois.edu>

2204 Griffith Drive
Champaign, IL 61820
Telephone: (217) 244-8226
Fax: (217) 244-0220
Email:
mrcc@isws.illinois.edu

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Contact: Kenneth Kunkel
(217) 244-1488

El Niño May Mean Less Snowfall in the Midwest This Winter

Much of the Midwest appears to have increased chances for below normal snowfall this winter as a result of the strengthening El Niño in the equatorial Pacific Ocean.

“Below normal snowfall is most likely to occur in Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and in the vicinity of Lake Michigan,” states Dr. Ken Kunkel, director of the Midwestern Climate Center.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) reports that the El Niño is already one of the strongest on record and predicts that it will continue over the next several months.

Scientists at the Midwestern Climate Center analyzed data collected at thousands of stations located throughout the Midwest and United States and compared snowfall occurring during six winters with strong El Niños (1957-58, 1965-66, 1972-73, 1982-83, 1986-87, and 1991-92) and snowfall occurring in all other winters since 1951.

“We found that snowfall is consistently below normal during El Niño winters in the western Great Lakes and upper Mississippi River valley,” states Kunkel. “Some locations in Illinois and Indiana have averaged only about half of the normal snowfall during El Niño winters: for example, 12 inches in Indianapolis compared to 27 inches in an average winter. The greatest amount in any of these six winters in Indianapolis was 20 inches and the least amount 7 inches. Chicago received an average of only 25 inches in these six winters compared to a normal amount of 44 inches.”

Kunkel points out that the below average snowfall in the Midwest is part of a larger pattern stretching across the entire United States. During El Niño winters, the northern half of the United States has usually experienced below average snowfall.

Snowfall (inches) during Normal Winters and Average of Six Strong El Niño Events

<i>Location</i>	<i>Normal*</i>	<i>Snowfall</i>	<i>Average**</i> <i>(Six strongest El Niño events)</i>
Illinois			
Chicago Midway Airport	44	25	(20-33)
Champaign	27	13	(8-21)
Rockford	38	24	(19-31)
Springfield	25	14	(10-21)
Indiana			
Evansville	15	8	(4-14)
Indianapolis	27	12	(7-20)
South Bend	77	61	(35-80)
Michigan			
Muskegon	108	78	(36-118)
Pellston	113	71	(48-99)
Sault Ste. Marie	122	97	(76-113)
Traverse City	96	67	(41-93)
Ohio			
Columbus	30	20	(12-25)
Dayton	31	18	(12-23)
Wisconsin			
Madison	45	36	(27-44)
Milwaukee	51	39	(22-39)

Notes:

*Normal snowfall is based on all winters since 1951 (except the six El Niño events).

**The first number represents the average, and numbers in parentheses represent the range from low to high during the six El Niño winters.