A very strong El Niño points to a hotter season — with dams 87% full as the buffer

Heat is a confident signal this season. A drier-than-normal tilt appears later in the outlook but carries low confidence. Reservoir storage was estimated on 11 August 2026 at **87%** of capacity, above the **85%** held this time last year, though now easing — a genuine head-start for the basin. In scale it ranks among the stronger El Niños since 1951 (closest analogues 1965/66 and 1972/73).

How strong is this El Niño?



#4 of 24 El Niños since 1951 (RONI)

Forecast **November RONI** — the ENSO-strength index used by NOAA — as a needle against every El Niño on record (white ticks); higher is stronger. November is the reference month the historical comparison uses, not necessarily the season's peak, and down from +2.4 in last month's brief. Its closest analogues were 1965/66 and 1972/73 — whose January–March rainfall ran +16% and -31% respectively, a reminder that similar strength does not mean similar rainfall.

At a glance

- **El Niño** — very strong event · very likely
- **Hotter season** — likely
- **Drier season** — low confidence
- **Dams 87% full** — easing
- **Soil moisture very wet** (Apr–Jun) — 97th percentile, modelled estimate
- **Crop water demand ↑ ~6%** — crops lose more water when it is hotter

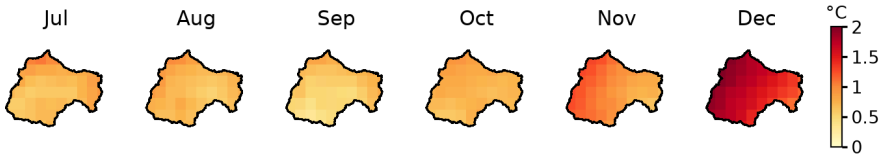
READING THIS BRIEF

- observed, or a forecast with proven skill
- low-confidence signal — worth monitoring

Only low-confidence items should prompt contingency planning, not commitments.

TEMPERATURE OUTLOOK

Most months in the outlook lean hotter than normal, strengthening toward the end of the period. Seasonal heat forecasts have a strong track record in this basin (verified skill: RPSS +0.25 vs ERA5).



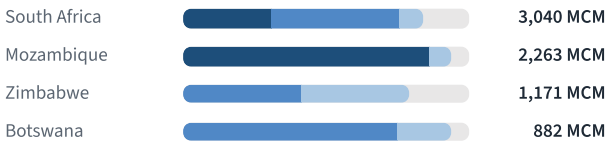
RAINFALL OUTLOOK

Models tilt slightly drier than normal from later in the season, consistent with El Niño climatology — but seasonal rainfall skill in the Limpopo is low (RPSS +0.00). Treat the drier tilt as a **watch, not a warning**, and revisit monthly.

WATER IN STORAGE — THE IRRIGATION BUFFER

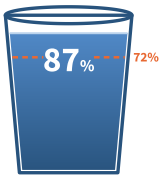
The basin's dams are **87% full** — a strong buffer as the season begins, easing to about **72%** by end-November as the dry season draws them down. Storage is down about **1 point** since last month's brief, but still above where it stood a year ago. This water is the season's supply for **irrigated** farming; rain-fed areas rely on rainfall and soil moisture instead.

Storage is a satellite-derived estimate, not an exact reading.



How each dam's volume was estimated: High · Medium · Low

High = machine-learning model · Medium = geometry / height-informed estimate · Low = capacity-fraction estimate



of capacity · dashed = ~72% by end-Nov

Recommended actions

1. **Protect the buffer.** Even with strong reservoir levels, begin — or continue — consultations with farming communities, municipalities and other water users so any drawdown stays managed if the dry tilt firms up.
2. **Prepare for heat.** Heat- and drought-tolerant varieties, mulching, and adjusted planting windows help reduce pressure on water and soils.
3. **Reassess monthly.** Rainfall confidence may not improve; treat heat and stored water as the planning basis. This brief is reissued each month.