



PREPARING FOR EL NIÑO 2026-27

*New Zealand Agricultural Outlook
Spring and summer 2026-27*

THE WINDY EL NIÑO

August Update — the record event, and what it means for your farm

Issued	6 August 2026
Valid period	September 2026 – March 2027
Supersedes	May 11 2026 Edition
Forecast basis	ECMWF and Bureau of Meteorology 1 August 2026 model runs; C3S nine-model ensemble (August); observed Pacific Ocean and atmosphere state to early August 2026; historical analogue analysis including the 1877/78, 1982/83 and 1997/98 events
Next update	Mid September 2026
Prepared by	Tony Trewinnard, Blue Skies Weather & Climate Services Ltd tony@blueskies.co.nz

WHAT HAS CHANGED since early May — AND WHAT HASN'T

The ocean event has escalated to record territory. The 1 August forecast runs from Europe (ECMWF) and Australia (Bureau of Meteorology) — two independent systems — now both point to Pacific Ocean temperatures peaking above every El Niño in the 150-year instrumental record, into the territory of the extreme 1877–78 event. In May we said strong, possibly very strong. That is superseded: this is on track to be the strongest El Niño ocean event in at least 150 years, and possibly the strongest ever measured.

Our New Zealand outlook has not changed by the same amount. The August model runs independently confirm the dry-east, wet-west pattern we described in May — now understood, as our July update explained, as a windy season rather than a hot one. What the escalation changes is the risk around that central case: the chance of the dry arriving harder, faster and deeper in the east has risen materially.

The preparation steps are the same — the urgency is not. Everything in the May decision calendar stands. Treat it as more urgent, not more optional. August is the last low-cost month.

1. The Front Page - If you read nothing else in this document, read this page.

What we now know

The El Niño in the Pacific is no longer just strong — on the measures that allow fair comparison across the decades, it is tracking to peak above every event in the instrumental record, and to rival the extreme event of 1877–78. The ocean side of this forecast is settled and observed: the weekly central-Pacific reading passed +2.3°C in early August, the atmosphere is fully coupled to the ocean, and NOAA now assigns an 81 percent chance of a very strong event by late spring. This is happening.

For New Zealand, the fresh August data confirms — not changes — the May picture: a high-pressure ridge parked north of the country, a deep trough to the south, and the strongest, most persistent westerly airflow of any season in recent memory squeezed between them, from spring right through summer. Wet west of the Southern Alps and in the far south. Dry, windy and high-evaporation east and north of the ranges. Temperatures near normal — the newest model runs even hint at a slightly cool lean in the south at the height of summer. This is a windy El Niño, not a hot one.

What the record strength means for you

- **Plan against the same season, with less benefit of the doubt.** The central forecast is unchanged. But when the engine driving the pattern is the biggest in 150 years, the odds of the dry arriving early, biting hard and holding long all shift against you. The 'moderated' outcome — where New Zealand largely escapes — is now the least likely of our three scenarios.
- **History's message is about shape, not just severity.** Even the monster 1877/78 event did not produce one uniform national drought — it produced two opposite extremes at once: violent drying and fire east of the mountains, heavy snow and spring flooding in and west of them. That split along the main divide is exactly the shape of this forecast. Where you sit relative to the ranges is the single most important fact about your season.
- **The difference between 1878 and 2026 is six months' warning.** The farmers of 1878 met that summer with no forecast, no feed market, no irrigation and no trucks. You are reading this in August with all four. Use the time.

Do these before the end of August

- Finish the feed budget through to March, assuming eastern and northern spring rainfall runs below normal from September. Feed is still cheap and available. It will not be in November.
- Confirm stock water reliability — every trough, every line, every backup. Wind-driven dry does not announce itself the way heat does.
- If you irrigate: confirm this month whether your supply is storage-backed, run-of-river, or groundwater. That single fact determines your restriction exposure in January.
- Book what gets scarce: contractors, freight, supplementary feed, shearing. A booking costs nothing to hold.
- Fire plan reviewed and current. This is a wind-driven fire season — faster fires, on days that do not feel dangerous.

What would tell us we are wrong

- **Eastern rainfall running normal through September–October.** If the east is genuinely wet through mid-spring, the event is under-delivering and you should weight the milder scenario.
- **A mid-summer wind shift to the northerly quarter.** The 2015/16 escape route. If January turns northerly and stays that way beyond ten days, the dry breaks. Watch it — but confirm it before acting on it.

→ **This report is a snapshot. Conditions will evolve.**

The Blue Skies Seasonal Outlook updates this picture monthly through spring and summer 2026-27 — fresh model runs, current ocean state, regional rainfall and soil moisture tracking. The six-week outlooks (issued each week) update you on specific conditions — like a week of hot dry weather with high evapotranspiration, or a wetter colder week when your irrigator can take a break.

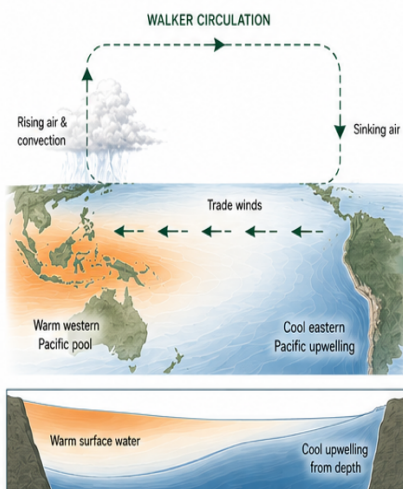
HOW EL NIÑO WORKS



How warming in the tropical Pacific reshapes New Zealand's weather

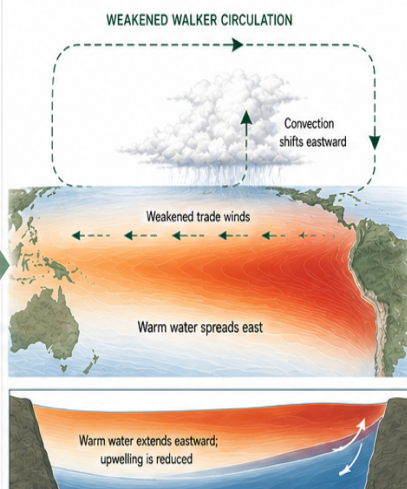
1 Normal Pacific Pattern

Strong trade winds keep warm water in the west and allow cool upwelling in the east.



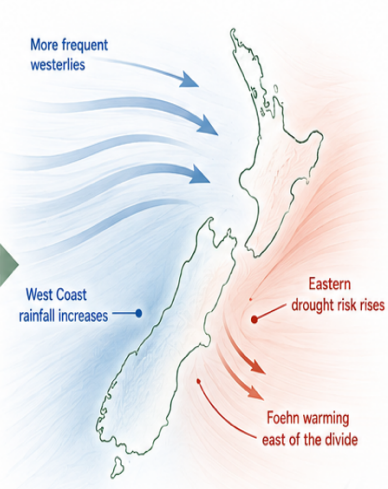
2 El Niño Emerges

Trade winds weaken, warm water spreads eastward, and convection shifts toward the central and eastern Pacific.



3 Impact on New Zealand

Circulation changes increase westerly airflow over New Zealand, bringing wetter west and drier east.



TROPICAL PACIFIC WARMING



CIRCULATION SHIFTS



NEW ZEALAND IMPACTS



THE BIG PICTURE

El Niño changes where tropical heat and rising air are concentrated across the Pacific. For New Zealand, this typically increases westerly airflow, bringing wetter conditions to the west and drier conditions to the east.

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2. The Ocean Event — How Strong, and How Sure Are We?

El Niño events are measured by how much warmer than normal the central Pacific Ocean becomes. Because the whole ocean has warmed over the last century, forecasters now also use a relative measure — how much warmer the El Niño region is compared with the rest of the tropics — which allows fair comparison between events decades apart. All figures below use that relative measure.

On this scale, the strongest events of the modern era — 1982/83, 1997/98 and 2015/16 — peaked between about +2.1°C and +2.4°C. The extreme 1877/78 event, reconstructed from ships' records, is estimated at roughly +2.8°C, though with real uncertainty in a number that old.

The 1 August forecast runs now available show:

- **ECMWF (Europe):** all 51 forecast scenarios peak between roughly +2.9°C and +3.7°C in November–December, with a central estimate near +3.3°C. Every single scenario exceeds every event in the instrumental record.
- **Bureau of Meteorology (Australia):** an independent model, peaking near +3.5°C in November, with even its coolest scenarios above +2.6°C.
- **Timing:** these forecasts look only three to four months ahead — the range at which El Niño strength forecasts are historically reliable. This is no longer long-range speculation.

And the observations are keeping pace with the models:

- The weekly central-Pacific (Niño 3.4) reading reached about +2.3°C in early August. The far-eastern Pacific, off South America, has run past +3°C — the signature of an intense eastern-Pacific type event, the type that historically produces the sharpest New Zealand response.
- The atmosphere is now visibly coupled to the ocean — trade winds slackening, tropical cloud shifting east. On one combined ocean-and-atmosphere index the coupled system was already running at record strength in July — above the equivalent readings at the peaks of 1982/83, 1997/98 and 2015/16.
- NOAA's 3 August diagnostic assigns an 81 percent chance of a very strong event by the October–December season, and NOAA is traditionally conservative.

Our full nine-model international comparison updates in mid-September; that September update will carry the confirmed figure. Until then, the honest statement is: this is on track to be the strongest El Niño ocean event in at least 150 years, and possibly the strongest ever measured.

2.1 Why a record ocean event does not lock in a record New Zealand drought

It is tempting to draw a straight line from “strongest ocean event since 1877” to “worst New Zealand summer since 1878.” That line should not be drawn, for four reasons.

- **New Zealand sits a long way from the engine room.** El Niño works on us indirectly, by reshaping the winds and pressure patterns around us. The strength of the ocean event and the severity of the New Zealand impact are only loosely connected: 2015/16 was one of the strongest events ever measured, yet a mid-summer wind shift spared most of the country serious drought. Two of the last three El Niños under-delivered here. Meanwhile, New Zealand's three most expensive recent droughts (2012/13, 2014/15, 2019/20) happened with no El Niño at all.
- **The Pacific's background state is working against full delivery.** The wider Pacific is in a decade-scale cool phase — now directly observed and quantified, and forecast to persist — that historically dampens how strongly El Niño expresses itself at our latitudes. It showed up in 2023/24, when a strong event delivered muted New Zealand impacts. But we must be honest about the limit of this argument: 1877/78 itself grew out of a cool-Pacific background and clearly overwhelmed it. A record-strength

event is exactly the kind that can punch through the damping. We carry this as a genuine two-sided uncertainty, not as reassurance.

- **The circulation pattern the models show is windy, not blocked.** The most damaging New Zealand droughts come from stationary high pressure parking over the country for weeks. That is not what the models show. They show the high pressure ridge retreating to the far north and strong, changeable westerlies sweeping the country — a pattern that dries the east and north through wind and evaporation while continuing to deliver rain and snow to the alps and the west. Drying by wind is a different, generally slower mechanism than drying by blocking heat.
- **The mountains stay on the wet side.** In a westerly El Niño, the alpine headwaters that feed the big eastern rivers and hydro lakes sit in the path of the moisture, not shielded from it. Even in 1877/78 the Canterbury high country and Otago experienced heavy snow and, at the spring melt, major flooding, at the same time as the plains below suffered extreme drought. The east dried out; the water towers did not.

2.2 What the August model runs say about New Zealand

The 1 August European run is the next fresh, independent test of the July update forecast — and it passes. The ridge-to-the-north, trough-to-the-south structure that drives the westerlies is reproduced unbroken from spring right through summer, with no sign of either a blocking high settling over the country or a trough collapsing onto it. When a fresh model run independently lands on the previous multi-model answer, that is the best kind of confirmation available at this range. Three details are worth your attention:

- **Spring is the peak of the wind.** September–November carries the tightest pressure gradient — and therefore the strongest and most persistent westerlies — of the entire forecast. A warm, very windy spring: equinoctial gales, high evaporation east of the ranges, sharp cold snaps embedded in a warm average. Lambing and calving shelter matters this spring.
- **Summer keeps the same machinery, slightly detuned.** December–February holds the westerly regime with barely less vigour. Windy, changeable, near-normal temperatures — and for the first time, the newest run shades the southern and eastern South Island slightly cool at the height of summer. If that survives the nine-model check later this month, we will say so plainly in September. The direction of every temperature revision since May has been the same way: slightly down.
- **The dry deepens late.** A wind-driven deficit builds cumulatively rather than arriving in one heatwave. The pinch point for the east coast is February–March — the classic late-season stress window — even in a 'broken' dry with occasional rain. The event will still be running strongly at the end of summer; plan autumn feed on that basis.

3. What History Says: 1877/78, 1982/83, 1997/98

Because this event is now being seriously compared with the greatest El Niño of the historical record, the New Zealand record of those seasons deserves close reading. Each carries a different lesson for 2026–27.

3.1 1877/78 — the event this one is being measured against

The 1877/78 El Niño is the benchmark extreme of the last two centuries — the event behind catastrophic famines across Asia and South America. New Zealand's record of that season survives in first-hand government stock inspectors' reports from 1878, region by region:

Region	1877/78 outcome (from the NZ Gazette annual sheep reports)
Hawke's Bay	"Extreme drought... suffered in a degree formerly unknown here" — unusually high sheep and cattle mortality, below-average lambing, a light wool clip.
Marlborough	Lambing collapsed to around 30 per cent.
Canterbury	"Extreme drought on the plains told on the number and condition of the sheep" — while the back country simultaneously endured an extremely severe winter. The Waimate bush was destroyed by a runaway grass fire.
Otago / Southland	Around 445,000 sheep lost — 11 per cent of the provincial flock — to repeated heavy snowstorms, with ground snow-covered for up to ten weeks. The spring melt produced the great Clutha flood of September 1878.

The pattern to take from this is not the severity — it is the shape. Even at record strength, the event did not produce one uniform national drought. It produced two opposite extremes at once: violent drying and fire risk east of the mountains, and heavy snow and flood west of and within them, split cleanly along the Southern Alps. That is the same shape our current forecast carries — at what we still expect to be a much more moderate intensity. Three practical lessons for this season follow directly:

- **Lambing and stock condition are where drought bites first and deepest.** Marlborough's 30 percent lambing and Hawke's Bay's mortality happened because there was no early exit — stock stayed on failing country until they failed with it. Early destocking is the modern answer, and it is available to you in a way it was not in 1877.
- **Fire is part of the same weather, not a separate hazard.** The Waimate fire ran through drought-cured fuel in wind. Cured grass plus persistent westerly wind is this season's signature combination.
- **The high country carries the opposite risk.** Heavy alpine snow loading, sharp storms, and spring-melt flooding in southern rivers were 1878's southern story. High-country operators and anyone farming a southern floodplain should hold that in mind through spring — a snow-rich alpine winter-spring followed by a warm melt is a flood setup, not a drought one.

3.2 1982/83 — the proof that El Niño drought does not need heat

The 1982/83 event was, until now, arguably the strongest of the twentieth century after 1877/78, and it delivered the textbook New Zealand response: droughts declared in Hawke's Bay and Gisborne, severe national dryness, wet west. The detail that matters most for this season is the temperature: the 1982/83 summer ran with persistent westerly flow that generally kept temperatures down. It was a cool, windy, sunny drought. Cooler air holds less moisture, so less rain falls — which is precisely how El Niño delivers serious drought without delivering heat. Cool southwest changes were frequent and locally stormy — the east of the South Island saw more thunderstorms and hail showers than usual, and even the Halswell tornado in January 1983. The rest of the country was not far behind on the thunderstorm count.

The lesson: do not use temperature as your dry-season trigger this summer. In 1982/83 the paddocks failed while the thermometer looked unremarkable. Watch soil moisture directly, and treat a run of five or six hard northwesterly days as the warning that matters. This is the single most important operational habit to change from a 'normal' drought year.

3.3 1997/98 — the economic reference case

The 1997/98 event is the best-documented of the big El Niños and remains the economic benchmark. The drought associated with it cost the New Zealand economy in the order of \$618 million — about 0.9 percent of GDP — with agriculture alone accounting for roughly \$425 million in 1998 dollars, very roughly double that in today's money. The worst-affected districts were Marlborough, North Canterbury, the Wairarapa and Hawke's Bay — the same dryland east-coast country at the top of our exposure ranking this year. Some Hawke's Bay apple growers left close to half their crop unpicked after sunburn and heat damage. The event was shorter-lived than 1982/83 but sharp.

Three lessons carry directly to 2026–27:

- **Timing was the whole margin.** The operators who moved store stock in September and October of 1997 sold into a functioning market. Those who waited until December sold into a flooded one, at the same time as every neighbour, into the same processors. The spread between those outcomes was larger than any other factor in the season.
- **The damage concentrated on dryland country.** In 1997/98 Canterbury was substantially a dryland province. Today roughly 480,000 hectares of it are irrigated — the single biggest structural difference between then and now, and the reason we expect this event's economic footprint to be differently shaped: lighter on irrigated country, at least as heavy on the dryland east coast of both islands.
- **Horticulture's loss was a management gap, not just weather.** The unpicked Hawke's Bay apples of 1998 reflected sunburn arriving on unprepared blocks. Sunburn protection, shelter integrity and early harvest planning are cheap by comparison. This season the wind adds fruit-rub to the list — shelter matters twice over.

3.4 The honest record, updated

Set alongside each other, the big events read as follows. Note how loosely event size and New Zealand outcome are connected — in both directions.

Season	Event size	What actually happened in New Zealand
1877/78	Extreme (~+2.8 rel.)	Two extremes at once: record east-coast drought, mass stock losses, lambing collapse, fire — and heavy snow with spring flooding in the south and high country.
1972/73	Strong	Generational Canterbury drought; NZ's all-time record 42.4°C at Rangiora. Opposite ocean background to today's — treated as a ceiling, not a parallel.
1982/83	Very strong	Textbook delivery. Locally stormy. Droughts declared in Hawke's Bay and Gisborne. Westerly flow kept temperatures down — a cool, windy drought.
1997/98	Very strong	Severe drought, worst in Marlborough, North Canterbury, Wairarapa, Hawke's Bay. ~0.9% of GDP. Sharp but shorter-lived.
2015/16	Very strong	Under-delivered. Dry December, then a January flip to northerlies and four ex-tropical cyclones. Much of the country finished near normal.

2023/24	Strong	Muted New Zealand impact despite a textbook set-up — the damped case, and the one your bank manager remembers.
2026/27	Record-class (forecast)	<i>The windy westerly summer — this report.</i>

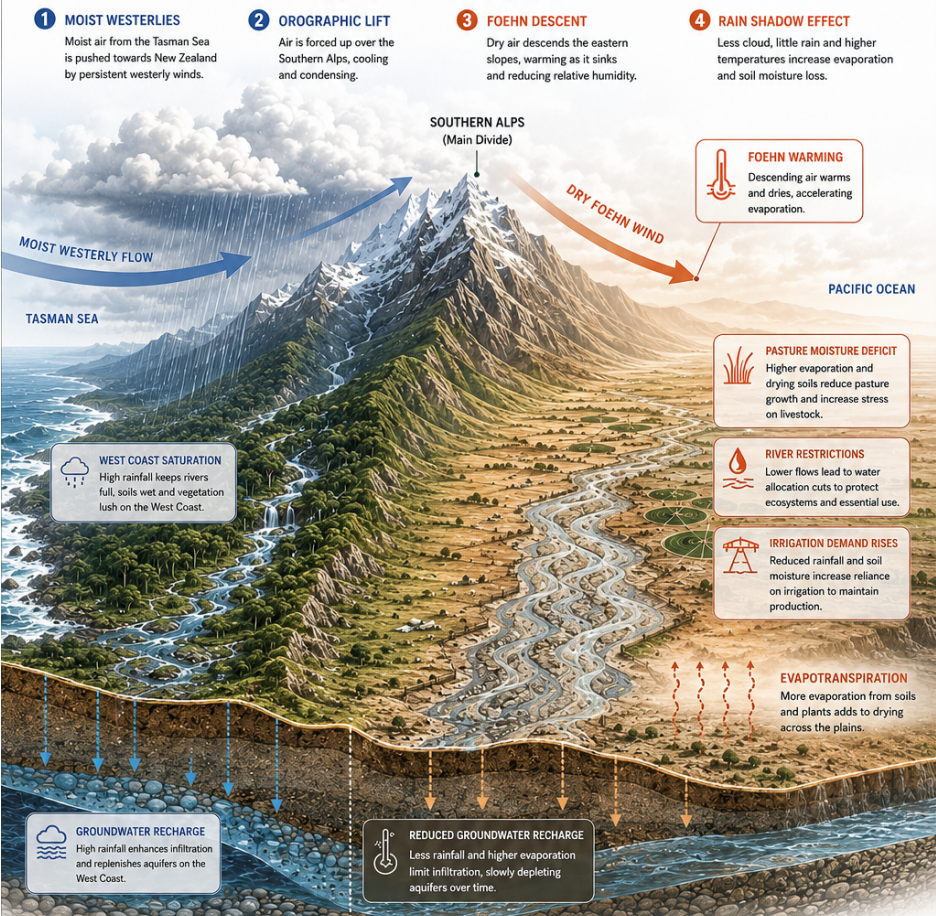
HOW TO HOLD ALL THIS AT ONCE

El Niño loads the dice toward eastern dryness; it does not roll them for you. A record event loads them further than we have ever seen them loaded — and still does not roll them. The correct response is not fatalism and not complacency: it is preparation that is cheap if we are right and cheap if we are wrong. That is what the regional guidance and the decision calendar below are built to deliver.

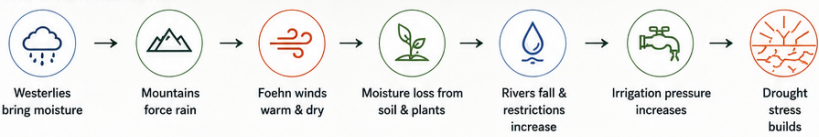
THE WATER STORY

How El Niño dries eastern New Zealand

During El Niño, persistent westerlies and warmer northwest winds combine to saturate the West Coast while drying the east. The result is less rain, more evaporation, shrinking rivers and rising pressure on irrigation – a recipe for drought stress.



THE CHAIN REACTION



New Zealand's water story is a balance between supply and demand. When the atmosphere shifts, so does the balance.

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4. The Three Ways This Season Can Go — Reweighted

We carry three scenarios every cycle. The August escalation changes their weighting and widens the top end compared to our last El Niño Preparedness report; it does not change their structure.

Central case — the windy westerly summer (unchanged, still most likely)

A changeable, windy, westerly-dominated season from spring through summer. Persistent drying in the east and north driven by wind and evaporation rather than blocking heat; near-normal temperatures in the south, mild in the north; alpine and western catchments regularly resupplied; hydro lakes well fed. Dryland eastern farming faces a progressively harder season with the pinch in February–March; irrigated systems remain supplied unless allocation rules intervene. This remains our working forecast and the basis of the decision calendar.

Upside-risk case — full delivery at record strength (probability raised)

If the record ocean event punches through the Pacific's decade-scale damping — as 1877/78 punched through its own cool background — the same westerly pattern intensifies rather than changes shape. The realistic expression: eastern and northern drought developing faster and biting harder from late spring; elevated and earlier fire danger; more frequent damaging wind events; heavier alpine snow loading with an associated spring flood risk in southern rivers; and greater pressure on stock condition and feed into autumn. This is the 1878-shaped season at modern intensity — serious, but met with six months' warning, modern irrigation, and functioning markets. It is a scenario to plan against, not to panic over.

Moderated case — the damped event (probability reduced but retained)

The Pacific's cool background limits what reaches New Zealand, as in 2023/24: the regime present but patchy, amounts moderated, at least one region in the expected dry zone surprisingly wet. The August escalation makes this the least likely branch — but two of the last three El Niños landed here, and it stays on the table. The mid-summer break variant (the 2015/16 January flip) sits within this family and is watchable in real time.

Scenario	Weighting	What it looks like by February
Central — windy westerly summer	Most likely	Established eastern/northern dry, severe in the Tier 1 regions; West Coast and alps wet; hydro full; a significant wind-driven fire season; temperatures unremarkable.
Upside — full delivery at record strength	Raised — now the main alternative	Drought entrenched by Christmas in the east; early severe fire season; damaging wind events; spring flood risk in southern rivers off a heavy alpine snowpack.
Moderated — damped delivery / mid-summer break	Reduced, retained	Dry lean present but patchy, or a January northerly flip brings relief; season finishes closer to normal in many districts.

→ Your region in detail, every month.

The Blue Skies Outlook delivers a regional outlook for your specific area each month — model agreement, rainfall and temperature anomalies, soil moisture trajectory, and the regional confidence narrative.

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HOW THE SEASON TIGHTENS

A four-stage evolution through spring and summer 2026-27



SEASONAL INTENSITY ARC



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5. The Thirteen Regions — Outlook and Decision Points

Each region below carries: the expected pattern, the spring decision points (September–November), and the summer decision points (December–March). Confidence is stated per region. The wet/dry boundary in this pattern is the main divide itself and the switch is abrupt — if you are east of the ranges you are on the dry side, full stop. Read your own region, then read the sector impacts in Section 6. You can use the National Calendar in Section 7 to organise your own farm plan.

1. Northland / Auckland

Exposure: Tier 2 — moderate; quiet escalation in this run | **Confidence:** Moderate — the dry lean is firming but this region has the widest range of outcomes

The pattern: Sits under the northern ridge — more settled and less windy than the rest of the country, warm, and leaning dry. The newest runs edge the subtropical dry band closer to the far north by mid-summer, which is the quiet escalation of this update: Northland's summer dry signal has firmed, not faded. Fewer humid northeasterlies, fewer subtropical rain-makers, reduced tropical cyclone influence.

Spring decision points (Sep–Nov):

- September: stock water audit — reticulation, troughs, backup supply. Dry summers expose the weak points here before feed does.
- October: feed budget check against actual spring growth; book supplementary feed while northern demand is quiet.
- November: horticulture (avocado, kiwifruit, citrus) — confirm irrigation capacity and scheduling before peak demand; check shelter.

Summer decision points (Dec–Mar):

- December: if the dry band has arrived (rainfall clearly below normal), move to conservative rotations and early feed use — do not wait for visual drought.
- January: watch for any northerly/ex-tropical break — in this region a single system can reset soil moisture; take the regrowth but do not re-budget around a second one.
- February–March: the deep-dry window. Water carting contingency for dry districts; pasture renewal decisions deferred until autumn rain is actually in the ground.

2. Waikato

Exposure: Tier 2 — moderate, split east–west | **Confidence:** Moderate

The pattern: Split by the westerlies: eastern Waikato and the Hauraki Plains lean dry in the lee of the ranges; western and southern Waikato catch enough westerly rain to run closer to normal. Windier than a normal season throughout. The contrast between farms 30 km apart will be significant.

Spring decision points (Sep–Nov):

- September: feed budget assuming below-normal growth east of SH1; western farms plan near-normal but windier.
- October: maize planting — favour moisture-secure paddocks; book silage contractors with flexible windows (wind will cut workable days).
- November: eastern/Hauraki farms set a December destock trigger now: if soil moisture is below the 20th percentile by end-November, lighter classes go.

Summer decision points (Dec–Mar):

- December: eastern dairy — assess pasture cover weekly; early once-a-day or dry-off decisions for tail-end cows beat February crisis decisions.
- January: maize silage water demand peaks — irrigated fine, rain-fed eastern crops at risk; lock in alternative feed if yields are failing.
- February–March: the eastern deficit pinch. Autumn feed plan on a slow-recovery assumption; do not restock on the first rain.

3. Bay of Plenty

Exposure: Tier 2 — moderate; eastern BOP higher | **Confidence:** Moderate — High for the eastern dry lean

The pattern: Warm and leaning dry, driest toward East Cape and the eastern ranges' lee. Sheltered from the worst of the westerlies at the coast but with foehn-warmed dry spells off the Kaimais. Kiwifruit and avocado water demand will be the regional story; East Cape pastoral country dries hard.

Spring decision points (Sep–Nov):

- September: orchard irrigation systems serviced and tested before demand arrives; shelter integrity checked (wind-rub risk this season).
- October: East Cape / eastern BOP drystock — move light stores early, ahead of the Gisborne–Hawke's Bay wave hitting the same market.
- November: confirm harvest and spray contractor flexibility — wind-limited windows will compress operations.

Summer decision points (Dec–Mar):

- December: kiwifruit — irrigation scheduling to night/early morning in windy spells; monitor fruit-size response, not the calendar.
- January: avocado heat/water stress management; stock water daily checks inland.
- February–March: fire vigilance in plantation country (Kaingaroa fringe); water budgets for the dry tail of the season.

4. Gisborne

Exposure: Tier 1 — high. Among the most exposed regions in any El Niño | **Confidence:** High for the dry direction; the magnitude is the open question

The pattern: The classic El Niño casualty and near the top of the exposure table again: hill country drying from spring, wind-driven moisture loss on light soils, elevated fire danger, and no alpine water source behind it. The +IOD spring amplifier bears directly on this coast. Severe drought is a credible outcome; 1997/98 concentrated its damage on country like this.

Spring decision points (Sep–Nov):

- September: THE decision month. Store stock policy written down — which classes go, at what trigger. Feed budget finished. Water reticulation checked.
- October: execute early destocking of light stores and surplus ewes into a functioning market — before Hawke's Bay and Wairarapa flood it.
- November: if September–October rainfall ran <75% of normal, escalate: second-tier classes off, supplement contracts locked, fire plan active.

Summer decision points (Dec–Mar):

- December: stock water becomes the daily discipline. Fire — machinery protocols and firebreaks live, using wind forecasts not temperature as the trigger.

- January: hill-country pasture failure credible from here — pre-agreed feed rationing and capital-stock priority list in force; talk to processor about space, not just price.
- February–March: the hardest window. Body condition triage for next season's tupping; horticulture (citrus, squash) water and heat management; autumn re-entry plan only on actual rain.

5. Hawke's Bay / Wairarapa

Exposure: Tier 1 — high. The 1997/98 epicentre | **Confidence:** High — the most confident severe-exposure call in this outlook

The pattern: The region where 1997/98 and 1877/78 both concentrated their damage, and the heaviest exposure in this outlook: deep accumulating soil moisture deficit from spring, hard wind-driven loss on light soils, severe fire potential, and rivers fed by ranges that dry at the same time as the farmland. Wairarapa shares the full template and should plan identically. Apple and stone-fruit country adds sunburn-plus-wind-rub risk; viticulture adds flowering-wind risk.

Spring decision points (Sep–Nov):

- September: feed budget and stock policy finished and written. Destocking triggers set. Irrigation users confirm allocation rules and restriction protocols.
- October: move store stock early — the 1997 lesson in one line: September–October sellers got a market, December sellers got a queue. Orchard shelter repaired before the westerlies peak; sunburn protection ordered.
- November: commitment month. If soil moisture is diverging (below ~20th percentile), execute deeper destocking now; lock late-summer feed; fire plan active with wind-based triggers.

Summer decision points (Dec–Mar):

- December: irrigation scheduling to night/early morning; vineyard flowering-wind watch; first severe fire-weather days likely — machinery discipline.
- January: THE PIVOT month nationally — if westerlies hold, move to worst-case contingency: processor bookings, feed rationing, dry-off decisions. If a northerly break arrives, verify ten days before believing it.
- February–March: peak deficit and peak fire risk. Harvest early where quality allows; apple/stone-fruit picking priority to sun-exposed blocks; autumn feed on slow-recovery assumption; lender conversation before the pressure point, not at it.

6. Taranaki / Manawatū

Exposure: Tier 2–3 — mixed, generally favoured | **Confidence:** Moderate — high confidence in the west–east split itself

The pattern: One of the better-placed regions. Coastal and western Taranaki catch the westerly rain and should run near normal or better — the constraint is wind and compressed workable windows, not moisture. Inland and eastern Manawatū and the Tararua east country lean dry, shading toward the Wairarapa picture at the eastern edge. Very windy throughout — the Manawatū corridor funnels this pattern hard.

Spring decision points (Sep–Nov):

- September: western dairy — near-normal planning but with wind: shelter for calving, pugging management in wet westerly spells.
- October: Tararua-east and inland drystock — treat as lower-grade Hawke's Bay: light stock moved, feed secured.

- November: silage — take the first fine window offered; in this regime there is frequently no better one later.

Summer decision points (Dec–Mar):

- December: spray and harvest scheduling around wind; irrigation (where used) to calmer hours.
- January: eastern-edge farms watch soil moisture divergence; western farms watch pasture quality (rank growth in wet spells).
- February–March: eastern Manawatū feed pinch; western farms broadly normal autumn planning.

7. Wellington

Exposure: Tier 2 — wind first, dry second | **Confidence:** High for wind; moderate for rainfall detail

The pattern: The windiest region in the windiest season of this forecast. Repeated gale-force northwesterly episodes through spring and early summer, Cook Strait disruption, and real wind-damage risk to horticulture and infrastructure. Rainfall: Hutt/western hills near normal; the agricultural weight of the region is Wairarapa, covered above — east of the ranges, plan with Hawke's Bay/Wairarapa.

Spring decision points (Sep–Nov):

- September: wind-damage audit — shelter, structures, glasshouses, irrigation lines; the equinoctial peak arrives with the strongest gradient of the forecast.
- October: contractor scheduling with generous slack — wind will cost more working days than rain.
- November: fire plan for the Wairarapa side; urban-fringe lifestyle blocks check stock water.

Summer decision points (Dec–Mar):

- December: take fine-day windows immediately for any weather-sensitive operation.
- January: watch the national pivot; Wellington water supply restrictions plausible by mid-summer in a full-delivery season.
- February–March: fire vigilance in a cured, windy landscape east of the ranges.

8. Nelson

Exposure: Tier 2–3 — split; generally manageable | **Confidence:** Moderate

The pattern: Split as always: western Tasman and Golden Bay catch westerly rain and run near or above normal; the Waimea Plains, Moutere and eastern hills sit in partial lee and lean dry with high sunshine. Hops, apples and viticulture face a high-evaporation, windy season with water demand ahead of a normal year but without the East Coast's severity.

Spring decision points (Sep–Nov):

- September: irrigation infrastructure serviced; water metering and allocation rules confirmed (Waimea dam changes the calculus — know your band).
- October: hop and orchard wind-shelter integrity; frost vigilance retained — clear calm nights behind fronts are still frost nights.
- November: dryland pastoral in the Moutere hills — feed and stock decisions on eastern-region logic.

Summer decision points (Dec–Mar):

- December: irrigation scheduling discipline; fire awareness rises in the hill country and Sounds fringe.
- January: water restrictions plausible on unaugmented takes; harvest labour planning for a compressed, wind-broken window.
- February–March: fire remains the tail risk; autumn recovery generally quicker here than further east.

9. Marlborough

Exposure: Tier 1 — high. Lambing collapsed here in 1878; drought centred here in 1998 | **Confidence:** High

The pattern: Both history chapters name Marlborough: 30 percent lambing in 1877/78, worst-affected list in 1997/98. Dry, windy and sunny; the Awatere and southern valleys driest; hill country severely exposed; viticulture facing a high-evaporation season with wind at flowering the specific quality risk. Water restriction on the Wairau and Awatere is the most likely of any NZ wine region.

Spring decision points (Sep–Nov):

- September: hill-country stock policy written; the 1878 lesson is that stock left on failing country fail with it — set exit triggers now.
- October: vineyard irrigation systems proven at full capacity; flowering-wind risk noted for November management; frost kit ready regardless of the warm outlook.
- November: monitor flowering conditions; execute hill-country destocking on trigger, not on hope; confirm water restriction protocols with council/scheme.

Summer decision points (Dec–Mar):

- December: irrigation to night hours in wind; fire discipline in forestry and hill blocks — wind-driven fire risk is severe here.
- January: if restrictions arrive, pre-agreed block priority order executes; stock water daily checks inland.
- February–March: harvest scheduling early and flexible; the quality opportunity is real (dry, disease-light) if water and canopy hold; autumn feed for hill country on slow recovery.

10. West Coast

Exposure: Tier 3 — the opposite problem: too much water | **Confidence:** High — the wet call is the most confident regional signal in the forecast

The pattern: The wet side of the divide, all season. Well-above-normal rainfall from spring through summer — the strongest directly-modelled wet signal of the campaign sits over the western and southern South Island. The problems are saturation, pugging, slips, compressed work windows and river flood risk — amplified in the upside scenario by heavy alpine snowmelt.

Spring decision points (Sep–Nov):

- September: drainage cleared, culverts checked, race and gateway surfaces fixed — before the ground is saturated, not after.
- October: deferred-grazing plan for the softest country; effluent storage headroom checked (saturated ground halves your irrigation options).
- November: book hay/silage contractors with maximum flexibility; take the first real window.

Summer decision points (Dec–Mar):

- December: pugging management is the profit lever — sacrifice paddocks identified in advance beat improvised damage.
- January: watch river levels through any warm melt spell — snow-rich alps plus warm rain is the 1878 flood mechanism in modern form.
- February–March: pasture quality management (rank growth); slip and access repair windows; the season eases from here.

11. Canterbury

Exposure: Tier 1 — high, but split sharply by water access | **Confidence:** Very high for the dry-windy direction; the irrigation-supply picture is genuinely two-sided and favourable on the central case

The pattern: Firmly on the dry side of the divide: persistent northwest foehn, severe evaporative demand — moisture stripped by wind at unremarkable temperatures — and a cumulative deficit deepening through summer. The counterweight: the alpine headwaters of the Rakaia, Rangitata and Waitaki sit on the wet side, so run-of-river and storage supply should hold better than the rainfall deficit suggests. Demand, not supply, is the likelier constraint: high wind cuts pivot efficiency exactly when demand peaks. Dryland North Canterbury hill country and the Banks Peninsula/coastal dry belt face the full 1997/98 problem; the arable sector enters with the weakest balance sheet in the sector.

Spring decision points (Sep–Nov):

- September (irrigators): confirm your category — storage-backed, run-of-river, groundwater — and your scheme's restriction triggers. This is the single most important fact about your season.
- September (dryland): stock policy and feed budget finished; destocking triggers written; the North Canterbury hill country should plan as Tier 1 East Coast.
- October: ET₀ watch begins — sustained evaporative demand above ~115% of normal means pivots will fall behind; agree rotation-change triggers now. First fire-weather days possible; machinery discipline starts.
- November: commitment month. Dryland: execute deeper destocking on trigger. Irrigated: if soil moisture is falling despite full rotation, lengthen cycles or shrink the irrigated area before cover targets are missed. Arable: lock harvest contracting with flexibility; small-seed crops need wind-stage vigilance.

Summer decision points (Dec–Mar):

- December: night/early-morning irrigation becomes materially valuable; river flows vs minimum-flow triggers watched weekly; take every harvest window offered.
- January: the pivot month — if westerlies hold and flows approach triggers, pre-agreed paddock priority and dry-off plans execute; if a northerly break arrives, verify before unwinding anything.
- February–March: peak deficit and peak fire risk on the plains; dryland autumn feed on slow recovery; groundwater users note recharge will lag into 2027-28 — plan next season's water conservatively too.

12. Otago

Exposure: Tier 1 inland — high; coastal moderate. The transition zone sits here | **Confidence:** High inland; moderate coastal — the boundary itself is the uncertainty

The pattern: A region of contrasts, and this season's transition zone: Central Otago, the Maniototo and North Otago run hot-dry on eastern logic; coastal and South Otago sit near the boundary where westerly rain leaks through and outcomes genuinely could go either way. The Waitaki is the practical dividing line from Canterbury. In 1877/78 Otago's disaster was snow then flood, not drought — the high country and the Clutha catchment carry that same two-sided risk in the upside scenario: heavy alpine snow, then a warm-melt flood pulse.

Spring decision points (Sep–Nov):

- September: inland drystock — stock policy and feed budget on Tier 1 logic; high-country operators plan for late snow events at lambing.
- October: irrigation scheme reliability confirmed (Manuherikia and Taieri under most pressure); cherry/stonefruit shelter and irrigation proven before demand.
- November: inland destocking on trigger; monitor the Clutha/Kawarau catchments through spring melt — river and floodplain operators keep an eye on snowpack reports.

Summer decision points (Dec–Mar):

- December: cherry harvest heat/split management in foehn spells; inland stock water daily discipline; fire risk in tussock country is the regional signature — extreme caution with machinery.
- January: coastal/South Otago read the boundary — if you are getting rain, bank it (conservative rotations anyway); inland executes the dry plan.
- February–March: inland pinch window; autumn feed early; viticulture harvest scheduling early and flexible — the quality opportunity is real if water holds.

13. Southland

Exposure: Tier 3 — least exposed in the south; wet-side issues in the west | **Confidence:** Moderate–High

The pattern: The least drought-exposed region on the mainland this season. Western Southland and the Fiordland fringe run wet on the westerly regime — pugging and access are the issues; eastern Southland (Mataura plains, Gore) leans drier than normal but rarely reaches drought under this pattern. Cool, changeable, windy; cold snaps embedded all season. Fiordland hydro catchments: inflow guidance is high-confidence positive from spring through summer.

Spring decision points (Sep–Nov):

- September: western farms — drainage and access works now; shelter for lambing against wind-chill in a changeable westerly spring (this region's specific spring risk).
- October: eastern farms — stock water check inland; standard feed planning with a dry-lean margin.
- November: silage windows — take them as offered; contractor flexibility booked.

Summer decision points (Dec–Mar):

- December: pugging management west, water-vigilance east; this region may carry feed surpluses — sell into the northern deficit rather than sitting on them.
- January: grazing-support opportunity — Southland grass will be worth more than usual to East Coast operators; price it accordingly.
- February–March: broadly normal autumn; watch for the late-season southerly swing as the pattern begins to relax.

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6. Sector Impacts by Region — August 2026 Revision

The May version was written for a hot, blocked summer. This version is written for the season the models actually show: windy, changeable, near-normal temperatures, wind-driven moisture loss, and the wet/dry line on the main divide. Where a region has limited exposure to a sector, a short note is given. Read alongside the regional outlook and decision points.

The five changes that run through every region below: heat stress on stock and crops is downgraded (still episodic in foehn events east of the ranges, no longer the season's character); wind takes its place — wind-rub on fruit, wind-chill on shorn stock and newborns, lost spray/harvest/flying days, reduced spray-irrigation efficiency; fire is wind-driven and faster, and does not wait for hot afternoons; irrigation from alpine-fed rivers holds better than the rainfall deficit suggests, while rain-fed and foothill-fed supplies do not; and the February–March pinch replaces the December heatwave as the point of maximum stress.

6.1 Sector-specific preparation guidance

The notes below complement the regional priorities in Section 8. Read these alongside your own region's profile.

Dairy

- Build a 12-month feed budget rather than a 6-month one — this event will affect spring conditions for the 2027-28 season as well;
- In eastern dairying regions, assume 15–25% reduction in summer pasture cover relative to a normal year;
- Bring forward supplement contracts (silage, palm kernel, brewers grain, maize silage) — book before South Island demand drives prices;
- Once-a-day milking strategy for foehn wind episodes — review now, decide before December;
- Stock water reticulation reliability essential — service bores, replace ageing troughs, identify alternative supplies for paddocks dependent on a single source;
- Heat management for cow welfare — shade audit, water access, milking timing during heatwaves, fan and sprinkler readiness in shed;
- Talk to your processor about peak supply implications and any flexibility in pickup timing or production planning;
- Cull policy — identify low-producing cows now to dry off early in dry conditions, reducing pressure on the milking platform.

Pivot-irrigated dairy operations — particularly across mid and South Canterbury, but also in parts of North Otago, Marlborough, Hawke's Bay and the Wairarapa — face a specific set of challenges that warrant separate planning. The points below apply to operations on either run-of-river or groundwater takes (and to operations that draw on both):

- **Soil moisture monitoring is the central operational tool.** Under sustained NW foehn flow, evapotranspiration can run 30–50% above normal for extended periods, meaning a pivot that normally keeps up will fall behind — sometimes within a single rotation. Daily soil moisture readings (probe-based, not visual estimation) should be standard practice from December through February. Set explicit trigger points where rotation patterns change before pasture cover targets are missed.

- **Monitor river levels and minimum-flow status weekly from October.** If the catchment is heading toward minimum-flow restriction earlier than usual, plan now for partial cuts during peak demand periods. Identify which paddocks come off the rotation first if takes are restricted, and how irrigation hours will be reallocated. Confirm communication arrangements with your scheme operator.
- **Be prepared to change rotation patterns if ET rates run high.** Options include: lengthening pivot rotation cycles, applying higher-rate but less-frequent passes (where infiltration capacity allows), reducing the irrigated area to focus on highest-value paddocks, switching to deficit irrigation strategies on portions of the platform. The right choice depends on soil type, pasture species, and stocking pressure — but the trigger for the conversation is sustained high ET, not waiting until pasture cover has already fallen.
- **Groundwater-fed operations:** more resilient through summer but watch for declining well levels and pump efficiency loss as drawdown increases. Service pumps and bores now. The longer-term concern is reduced aquifer recharge — current-season groundwater use draws against reserves that may not refill quickly given reduced recharge through 2026, with consequences extending into the 2027-28 season. Plan the season's water use as if the next season may also be tight.
- **Run-of-river operations:** minimum-flow restrictions typically trigger from January in moderate-to-strong El Niño years, sometimes earlier. The Rakaia, Rangitata, Waimakariri, Hurunui and Waitaki schemes will all see pressure. Confirm your scheme's restriction trigger levels and notification protocols. Have a fallback plan that includes accelerated dry-off of lower-producing cows, reduced rotation length on remaining productive land, and supplement use to bridge through restricted periods.
- **Energy and pumping cost:** extended high-demand pumping through windy, dry summers carries elevated electricity cost. Review your power contract and demand-response options now. Consider scheduling pumping outside peak tariff windows where possible.

Sheep & beef

- Cull policy decisions now — write down which classes go first if conditions deteriorate, and at what triggers;
- Capital stock: prioritise premium genetics, move surplus through early — light stores off in October before competition tightens;
- Hill country: lambing percentages from current ewes will hold up because winter feed is unaffected, but next-season tugging conditions need active planning — body condition score targets through summer;
- Trading lambs and weaners: book finishing contracts early; consider off-farm finishing options in Southland or West Coast where feed supply is less stressed;
- Heat stress and wind chill: shearing timing review (earlier or later in the day), shade and water provision, no handling during hottest hours;
- Drought-tolerant pasture renewal — cocksfoot, lucerne, plantain mixes; expensive in establishment but pay back in dry summers;
- Supplementary feed contracts for late summer — book early before pricing rises;

- Mineral and trace-element planning — heat-stressed and supplement-fed stock have different requirements.

Horticulture

- Irrigation infrastructure inspection and upgrade now — pumps, mainlines, drippers, fertigation kit;
- Water rights and scheme allocations — confirm with regional council and seek variations where possible before scheme limits are reached;
- Heat-stress management plans for critical crops — overhead misting, shade cloth, kaolin-based sunscreens, pre-conditioning irrigation strategy;
- Sunburn protection (netting, kaolin clay) for orchards — apple and stone-fruit orchards in the east particularly;
- Shelter belts and windbreaks — review and reinforce; severe foehn events can damage less-sheltered blocks;
- Frost risk in late spring is still real — protect early flowering with frost-fans/sprinklers as normal;
- Workforce planning for compressed harvest windows — line up RSE and contract labour earlier than usual;
- Cold-chain logistics for heat-affected fruit — pre-cooling capacity may be tested; book transport and storage early.

Arable / cropping

- Crop rotation review — favour drought-tolerant species and earlier-maturing cultivars where the local climate allows;
- Plant early when possible — capture spring soil moisture before it disappears;
- Irrigation scheduling: peak ET_0 days in El Niño can exceed irrigation budget — plan for increased application rates and check pump capacity;
- Seed crop quality risk: heat affects germination and seed set — communicate early with seed processors about likely yield and quality changes;
- Processing crops (peas, beans, maize): heat stress reduces quality and yield; book early harvest slots with processors;
- Forage cropping (maize silage, lucerne, sorghum) becomes more valuable to the supplementary feed market — consider planting more area than usual;
- Fertiliser strategy review — sustained heat changes nitrogen response; split applications and avoid losses;
- Contractor booking — combine, baler and silage gear demand will spike when windows open; lock in early.

Viticulture

- Irrigation infrastructure check — drippers, fertigation, supply pressure;
- Canopy management — plan leaf removal and trimming to balance sunburn protection with airflow and disease control;

- Water rights and scheme allocation review (especially Marlborough Wairau and Awatere, where restrictions are most likely);
- Harvest scheduling: bring teams forward in the calendar — both vintage and processing capacity will be tested by compressed early-harvest windows;
- Tank space and cold-chain capacity planning for early-arriving fruit;
- Smoke taint contingency — eastern regions should have a testing protocol agreed with their winery before fire season opens;
- Quality vs quantity decision: in heat-stressed years, lower yields and premium quality may be the strategy. Make the call by November and align spray, canopy and irrigation programmes accordingly.

Other farming activities

- **Forestry:** fire-readiness, extraction window planning, fire breaks cleared and machinery management plans active by September. Plantation rotation planning may be affected by below-normal growth on dry sites.
- **Beekeeping:** hive locations may need shifting; supplementary feeding likely; reduced manuka and clover flow probable. Honey crop budgets should be reduced.
- **Deer farming:** heat stress management essential; supplementary feed planning; water reticulation reliability. Velvet timing may shift; communicate with processors.
- **Equestrian:** heat management, paddock rotation, supplementary feed; thoroughbred operations particularly need careful planning around summer events and training schedules.
- **Aquaculture:** elevated water temperatures change feeding response and disease pressure; mussel, salmon and oyster operations should review monitoring frequency.
- **Tourism:** weather product and itinerary flexibility — eastern regions favoured by sunshine, West Coast operators face higher cancellation risk; communicate weather realities to bookings early.

Northland / Auckland

Northern-ridge country this season: more settled and less windy than the rest of NZ, warm, leaning dry — with the subtropical dry band edging onto the far north by mid-summer, the quiet escalation of the August runs. Fewer humid northeasterlies, reduced tropical cyclone influence.

Pastoral / Dairy	Reduced reliable summer rainfall remains the core issue, firming rather than fading in the newest runs. Growth slows from December, hardest in eastern districts. Stock water reticulation is the classic Northland failure point — audit before summer. Kikuyu country copes better than ryegrass country; supplementary feed planning brought forward.
Sheep & Beef	Hill country assumes below-normal summer feed; light stores off early. Winter feed was unaffected, so current-season lambing holds; next-season tupping condition is the thing to actively manage through the dry tail.
Horticulture	Avocado, citrus and kiwifruit become water-dependent through a long dry tail; irrigation scheduling and water security are the priorities. Heat stress is downgraded from the May version — the risk is a steady water deficit, not heat spikes. Wind exposure lower here than any other region.
Arable	Limited exposure. Rain-fed maize and squash below average on the dry lean; kumara copes relatively well in dry seasons.

Viticulture	Small sector; a dry, sunny season is broadly favourable. Disease pressure low.
Other	Mānuka honey flow reduced in a dry summer; forestry growth slows; lifestyle blocks plan stock water conservatively. Fire risk elevated by cured fuel even without regional wind extremes.

Waikato

Split east–west by the westerlies: eastern Waikato and the Hauraki Plains dry in the lee of the ranges; western and southern Waikato near normal but windier. Farms 30 km apart will have different seasons.

Pastoral / Dairy	Eastern/Hauraki platforms under pressure from January; western Waikato close to normal. The operational surprise is wind, not heat: silage windows compressed, cow heat stress less than a normal El Niño script suggests. Early once-a-day and dry-off decisions for the eastern side beat February crisis calls.
Sheep & Beef	Hill country east of SH1 vulnerable; rotation lengthening from October; Hauraki/Coromandel hinterland drystock most exposed. Move light classes before the East Coast wave floods the market.
Horticulture	Pukekohe vegetables: water-dependent, and wind-abrasion on leafy crops enters the picture; shelter and irrigation scheduling the priorities.
Arable	Rain-fed maize east of the divide-line at risk; irrigated fine. Book harvest contracting with flexibility — wind will cut workable days.
Viticulture	Limited exposure.
Other	Equine (Cambridge/Matamata): feed planning yes, but heat management downgraded; wind shelter for young stock upgraded. Honey reduced; eastern forestry growth slows.

Bay of Plenty

Warm, leaning dry, driest toward East Cape; foehn-warmed dry spells off the Kaimais; partial shelter from the worst westerlies at the coast. Horticultural water demand is the regional story.

Pastoral / Dairy	Western BOP dairying manageable; eastern BOP and East Cape pastoral country dries hard from December. Stock water vigilance inland.
Sheep & Beef	East Cape drystock among the North Island's most exposed; early store movements critical — the same market window as Gisborne.
Horticulture	Kiwifruit: sustained water demand and — new this version — wind-rub on fruit and canopy where shelter is poor; night irrigation in windy spells protects both efficiency and fruit size. Avocado: water stress the lead risk, heat spikes secondary.
Arable	Limited exposure.
Viticulture	Limited exposure.
Other	Mānuka honey flow reduced. Kaingaroa forestry: fire risk elevated and wind-driven — machinery discipline on unremarkable-temperature days is the specific trap.

Gisborne

Top-tier exposure, as in every big El Niño: hill-country drying from spring, wind-driven loss on light soils, elevated fire danger, no alpine water behind it. The +IOD spring amplifier bears directly on this coast.

Pastoral / Dairy	Severe drought risk; hill-country pasture failure credible by late January. Lowland flats need reliable irrigation to hold quality. Stock water questions from November.
Sheep & Beef	The region's defining exposure. Destocking through September–October into a functioning market is the decision of the season; December sellers join the queue. Heat-stress mortality risk downgraded from May; body-condition and feed the central battle, wind-chill on shorn stock a real spring risk.
Horticulture	Citrus, persimmons, squash: water first, heat second. Wind-rub and shelter integrity now on the list. Waipaoa scheme reliability will be tested.
Arable	Sweetcorn and squash yields down on rain-fed land; maize and lucerne for feed become the most valuable crops on the flats — prioritise their water.
Viticulture	Dry and disease-light favours quality; early ripening compresses vintage logistics. Smoke-taint contingency in place before fire season.
Other	Forestry fire risk extreme and wind-driven. Honey reduced. Low river flows pressure recreational and consented takes alike.

Hawke's Bay / Wairarapa

The 1997/98 epicentre and the heaviest exposure in this outlook. Deep accumulating deficit from spring, hard wind-driven loss on light soils, severe fire potential; the ranges that feed the rivers dry with the farmland. Wairarapa plans identically.

Pastoral / Dairy	Severe drought likely from January; hill country worst (central HB, eastern Wairarapa, Tararua east). Irrigation-dependent dairy: allocations may tighten from January — Heretaunga/Ruataniwha users confirm restriction protocols now.
Sheep & Beef	Major destocking September–November is the season's defining decision — the 1997 lesson in one line: early sellers got a market. Capital stock: keep premium genetics, move surplus now. Wind-chill on shorn stock through the windy spring; shearing timing and shelter matter more than heat plans.
Horticulture	Apples and stone fruit: the 1998 unpicked-crop story was sunburn on unprepared blocks — sunburn protection still applies in foehn events, but wind-rub and shelter integrity are now co-equal risks. Repair shelter before the westerlies peak, not after the first damaging event. Irrigation to night hours in wind.
Arable	Feed cropping (maize, lucerne) becomes the region's most valuable arable activity — prioritise water and area. Process crops heat-checked in foehn spells; harvest slots booked early.
Viticulture	A dry, disease-light season with genuine quality upside for HB reds — if flowering-period wind and late-season water are managed. Early, compressed vintage; tank space and labour planned accordingly. Martinborough: same logic, Pinot style watch.
Other	Forestry fire severe and wind-driven. Honey well below normal. Wellington/Wairarapa water restrictions plausible mid-summer. Equine heat plans downgraded; wind and feed plans upgraded.

Taranaki / Manawatū

One of the better-placed regions. Coastal/western Taranaki near normal or better on westerly rain — the constraint is wind and compressed windows. Inland/eastern Manawatū and Tararua east lean dry on Wairarapa logic. The Manawatū corridor funnels this pattern hard.

Pastoral / Dairy	Coastal Taranaki: near-normal season, windier — pugging in wet westerly spells, shelter at calving. Inland/eastern platforms: feed pressure from late summer on eastern-region logic.
Sheep & Beef	Tararua-east hill country plans as lower-grade Hawke's Bay; Pohangina/Apiti/Norsewood more exposed than the plains. Coastal operations comparatively comfortable.
Horticulture	Limited exposure; glasshouse cooling demand modest in a not-hot summer; wind on structures the practical check.
Arable	Manawatū cropping: rain-fed at risk east, irrigated fine; pasture-seed crops need water reliability; harvest windows wind-broken — flexible contracting.
Viticulture	Limited exposure.
Other	Wind farms: a strong production season — consistent westerly throughput. Whitebait and river users: western rivers run full. Forestry fire moderate east of the ranges.

Wellington

The windiest region in the windiest season of the forecast. Agricultural weight sits in Wairarapa (covered above, east-of-ranges logic). West of the ranges: near-normal rainfall, repeated gale episodes, Cook Strait disruption.

Pastoral / Dairy	Wairarapa flats and east coast: plan with Hawke's Bay. Western hills/Hutt buffered.
Sheep & Beef	East Wairarapa among the most exposed country in NZ; early destocking decisions as per HB. Hill-country wind-chill at lambing in a violent spring.
Horticulture	Wind damage is the regional signature — shelter, structures, glasshouses, and young tree stakes checked before the equinoctial peak. Olive and small orchard blocks: water plans for the dry side.
Arable	Limited exposure.
Viticulture	Martinborough: flowering-wind the specific quality risk; otherwise a dry, disease-light season with upside if water holds. Early vintage.
Other	Urban water restrictions plausible by mid-summer in a full-delivery season. Forestry fire elevated east of the ranges. Aviation/ferry disruption planning for freight-dependent operations.

Nelson

Split: western Tasman/Golden Bay catch westerly rain and run near or above normal; Waimea Plains, Moutere and eastern hills in partial lee lean dry with high sunshine and high evaporation.

Pastoral / Dairy	Central Tasman/Moutere pasture below normal; Golden Bay near normal with wet-spell pugging. Small-scale pastoral: feed manageable if planned early.
Sheep & Beef	Sounds and eastern hill country dry on Marlborough logic; Murchison/Buller fringe comfortable.

Horticulture	The region's main exposure. Hops: high water demand, and wind on tall bines — trellis and shelter checks; alpha quality tied to avoiding water stress. Apples: irrigation plus wind-rub management; sunburn secondary to the May version. Waimea water: know your allocation band before summer.
Arable	Limited exposure.
Viticulture	Moutere/Waimea: dry and disease-light with quality upside if water holds; early compressed vintage.
Other	Fire risk in the hill country and Sounds fringe — wind-driven; honey reduced; aquaculture watches warm, wind-mixed bays rather than marine heatwave stratification.

Marlborough

Named in both history chapters — 30 percent lambing in 1877/78, worst-affected list in 1997/98. Dry, windy, sunny; Awatere and southern valleys driest; the most restriction-prone wine-region water in NZ.

Pastoral / Dairy	Hill country (Awatere especially) severely dry; plan on inland-Canterbury logic. Exit triggers written in September — stock left on failing country fail with it; that is the 1878 lesson in one sentence.
Sheep & Beef	Early destocking inland; stock water reliability checks; wind-chill after shearing in the violent spring; heat-stress planning downgraded but foehn days still occur.
Horticulture	Cherries (Awatere): harvest-window heat episodes and split risk in any rain interruption; wind protection for young blocks.
Arable	Wairau Plains cropping: irrigated viable, rain-fed reduced; lucerne the priority feed crop; small-seed crops vulnerable to wind at harvest stage — take windows immediately.
Viticulture	The critical exposure. Wairau/Awatere restrictions the most likely of any NZ wine region — pre-agree block priority. Flowering wind is the specific fruit-set risk in a windy November–December. The upside is real: dry, disease-light, concentrated fruit — acidity management in warm foehn spells the technical watch. Early, compressed vintage; harvest logistics planned for wind-broken windows.
Other	Forestry fire extreme and wind-driven — Marlborough's historic vulnerability. Mussel farms: wind-mixed Sounds rather than stratified heat; workable-day losses on the water. Honey reduced.

West Coast

The wet side of the divide, all season — the strongest directly-modelled wet signal of the campaign. Saturation, pugging, slips, compressed windows, river flood risk; amplified in the record-strength scenario by heavy alpine snowmelt.

Pastoral / Dairy	Excess moisture is the season. Pugging management is the profit lever — sacrifice paddocks identified in advance; rotations stretched after every front; effluent storage headroom checked before spring. Pasture surplus possible but quality drops in rank growth — consider selling supplement north and east into the deficit.
Sheep & Beef	Limited regional exposure; access and river crossings the practical constraints; Buller/Karamea drystock watch slips and flood-cut access.

Horticulture	Negligible exposure.
Arable	Negligible exposure.
Viticulture	Negligible exposure.
Other	Forestry extraction: windows compressed by frequent fronts — book freight in clear stretches, move when you can. Mining and tourism plan for a wet season with elevated flood/slip disruption. Watch river levels in any warm melt spell — snow-rich alps plus warm rain is the flood mechanism.

Canterbury

Firmly on the dry side of the divide: persistent NW foehn, evaporative demand 30–50 percent above normal for extended spells at unremarkable temperatures, cumulative deficit deepening to a February–March pinch. The counterweight: alpine-fed rivers (Rakaia, Rangitata, Waitaki) sit on the wet side, so irrigation supply should hold better than the rainfall deficit suggests. Demand and efficiency, not supply, are the likelier constraints.

Pastoral / Dairy	The picture splits by water. Pivot platforms: the failure mode is ET outrunning pivot capacity in wind — with efficiency losses to drift on top. Soil moisture probes, not visual checks; rotation-change triggers agreed before cover targets are missed; night/early-morning application materially valuable. Run-of-river users: alpine supply favourable on the central case but confirm restriction triggers and paddock priority anyway. Groundwater: resilient this summer, recharge lags into 2027-28 — plan next season conservatively too. Dryland and hill country (Hurunui, Banks Peninsula, foothill fringe): the full 1997/98 problem — destock early.
Sheep & Beef	Hill-country destocking decisions September–November; heat-stress mortality risk downgraded from May — reallocate that attention to feed, water and wind-chill on shorn stock. Lambing shelter in the violent spring. Store market timing: before the crowd.
Horticulture	Apples and cherries: wind-rub joins sunburn as a co-equal quality risk; shelter repair before spring; irrigation to calm hours. Boutique berry/vegetable operations: water security and wind protection.
Arable	NZ's cropping heartland enters with the sector's weakest balance sheet — the financial exposure exceeds the agronomic one. Agronomically the season has upside: sunshine, low disease, good harvest quality — if wind is managed. Small-seed crops: shatter and lodging risk in wind at vulnerable stages; harvest windows taken immediately, contracting booked with flexibility. Irrigated cereals broadly secure on alpine water; rain-fed yields down. Seed quality: heat checks in foehn spells — communicate early with processors.
Viticulture	Waipara: dry, disease-light, water-dependent; flowering wind the watch; quality upside real.
Other	Fire is the regional wild card: cured plains fuel plus persistent NW wind is the most dangerous combination in the country this season — machinery discipline on unremarkable-temperature days. Lucerne and irrigated forage are the drought-mitigation assets: prioritise. Salmon (Mackenzie): flows favourable on alpine supply. Honey reduced.

Otago

The transition zone. Central Otago, Maniototo and North Otago run dry on eastern logic; coastal and South Otago sit near the boundary where westerly rain leaks through. The Waitaki divides the Canterbury picture from the Otago one. In 1877/78 Otago's disaster was snow then flood — in the record-strength scenario the high country and Clutha catchment carry that two-sided risk again.

Pastoral / Dairy	Inland (Maniototo, Ida Valley, Manuherikia): among the most exposed dryland country in NZ — plan on Tier 1 logic, destock on trigger. North Otago: inland-Canterbury logic, alpine Waitaki water the counterweight for irrigated platforms. Coastal/South Otago: genuinely two-sided — plan conservatively, bank any westerly rain that arrives.
Sheep & Beef	Merino country: heat-tolerant but feed-limited; body condition through the February–March pinch governs next season. High-country: late-spring snow events at lambing are part of this regime — shelter and paddock selection. Early store movements inland.
Horticulture	Cherries and stone fruit (Cromwell, Ettrick, Roxburgh): harvest-period foehn heat episodes and wind; split risk if rain interrupts; irrigation scheme reliability (Manuherikia, Taieri) the structural question — confirm allocation before summer.
Arable	North Otago/Maniototo: irrigated only viable; process crops heat-checked in foehn spells.
Viticulture	Central Otago Pinot: a dry, disease-light season with compressed early ripening; Bannockburn hottest, Gibbston cooler — sub-regional spread wider than usual. Water and canopy management decide whether this is a stress vintage or a great one.
Other	Tussock fire is the regional signature risk — wind-driven, fast, on unremarkable days. Clutha floodplain and river operators: watch snowpack reports through spring and the melt sequence — the 1878 mechanism at modern scale is the tail risk. Honey reduced; tourism watches fire and wind disruption.

Southland

Least drought-exposed mainland region. Western Southland and the Fiordland fringe run wet — pugging and access the issues; eastern Southland leans drier than normal but rarely reaches drought under this pattern. Cool, changeable, windy; cold snaps all season; the newest runs shade the far south slightly cool at mid-summer.

Pastoral / Dairy	Western platforms: wet-season management — drainage, sacrifice paddocks, effluent headroom. Eastern: mild dry lean, manageable with normal vigilance. The regional opportunity: Southland grass will be worth more than usual — sell supplement and grazing north into the deficit rather than sitting on surpluses.
Sheep & Beef	Manageable season; lambing shelter against wind-chill in a changeable westerly spring is the specific risk; cool summer nights support stock condition. Grazing-support demand from East Coast operators likely — price it properly.
Horticulture	Limited exposure.
Arable	Eastern process crops viable; western operations too wet in spells; harvest windows wind-broken — flexible contracting.
Viticulture	Limited exposure.
Other	Fiordland hydro: high-confidence above-normal inflow — favourable. Deer (Te Anau, Mossburn): feed planning normal-plus; heat stress a minor issue this season. Forestry fire lower than regions north but not zero.

7. The National Decision Calendar

The operational heart of the document, updated from May. Each row: the month, what to watch, the decision it forces, and the cost of being late. The season commits in November; January is the pivot.

Month	What to watch	The decision	Cost of being late
AUGUST (now)	Blocking high still over NZ — a deceptively quiet month. Do not read calm weather as a cancelled forecast. Mid-August: nine-model comparison confirms or moderates the record escalation.	Finish the cheap preparation: feed budget to March, stock water audit, irrigation category confirmed, contractors/freight/shearing booked, fire plan current.	Everything on this list gets dearer and scarcer from October. This is the last low-cost month.
SEPTEMBER	The block breaking down; westerlies establishing; eastern rainfall vs normal — the first real verification of the outlook. Equinoctial gale risk rising.	Set stock policy: which classes go first, at what trigger, in writing. Confirm feed contracts. First destocking for the most exposed hill country. Shelter for lambing against wind-chill.	Selling into a normal market becomes selling into a crowded one by November. The price difference is the whole margin.
OCTOBER	Evaporative demand in the east (>115% of normal sustained = soil moisture being outrun). First big northwesterly events. West Coast rainfall >130% of normal confirms the regime.	Execute September's stock decisions. Fire plan active — wind-based triggers, not temperature. Irrigation rotation strategy agreed. Spray/harvest programmes rescheduled around wind.	By November the store market is crowded, contractors committed, feed priced for a drought.
NOVEMBER	The commitment month. In every comparison year the season had shown its hand by late November. Soil moisture, river flows, and whether eastern rainfall is genuinely failing.	Commit. Irreversible decisions become justified: deeper destocking, dry-off planning, reduced irrigated area, contract renegotiation. Or — if verification is failing — begin easing toward the milder plan.	The last month in which action is preventative rather than reactive.
DECEMBER	Peak westerlies. High wind run, moderate temperatures. Canterbury/Otago river flows vs minimum-flow triggers. Fire-weather days multiplying in the east.	Manage the water: night irrigation, extended rotations, priority paddocks. Take every fine window for harvest and silage. Fire discipline absolute on machinery.	Missed windows do not come back in a changeable regime. Water lost to wind drift is water you paid for.
JANUARY	THE PIVOT. If winds swing northerly and rain arrives — the 2016 signature — the pattern may be breaking: confirm >10 days before acting. If westerlies hold, the dry entrenches.	Read the pivot and respond: either begin recovery planning, or move to worst-case contingency — processor space, feed rationing, dry-off, lender conversation.	Misreading a break as noise costs a recovery window. Misreading noise as a break costs far more.
FEBRUARY–MARCH	Peak accumulated deficit and peak fire risk in the east, even as the event's peak passes.	Manage recovery realistically: pasture recovery constrained by the accumulated deficit; autumn feed planned on a slow start;	Over-optimistic autumn planning is the classic post-drought error — it

	The pattern lags the ocean; relief is gradual.	restock on actual rain, not forecast rain.	carries the damage into next season.
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THE MARKER POINTS THAT SHOULD MAKE YOU CHANGE PLAN

Eastern rainfall runs normal through September–October. The event is under-delivering; ease toward the milder scenario.

October evaporative demand sustained above 115% of normal in the east. Soil moisture is being outrun; irrigation demand will exceed budget on pivot platforms.

Canterbury alpine rivers approaching minimum-flow triggers before Christmas. Run-of-river restrictions earlier than usual; confirm which paddocks come off first.

West Coast rainfall above 130% of normal, October–November. The westerly regime is confirmed; the eastern dry signal is reinforced.

Heavy alpine snowpack reports through spring. New this update: the record-strength scenario loads southern alpine snow. High-country and floodplain operators in Otago/Southland watch the melt — the 1878 Clutha mechanism.

A run of northerly-quarter weather in January. The 2016 signature. Treat as a possible genuine break — but confirm it lasts more than ten days before acting on it.

December rainfall below 50% of normal in Canterbury or Hawke's Bay. Severe trajectory confirmed. Emergency feed contingency and lender conversations now, not later.

8. Regional Preparation Priorities — August 2026 Revision

Not every region faces the same problem. The five groupings below describe what each part of the country should prioritise between now and summer. Cross-reference your region's outlook and sector table for the full picture. The May version had four zones; this version adds a fifth — the alpine and high-country snow/melt zone — because the record-strength scenario loads it.

THE ESCALATION LADDER

How operational pressure increases during El Niño 2026–27



SOIL MOISTURE



RIVER FLOW



IRRIGATION



FOEHN /
WESTERLIES



FIRE WEATHER



OPERATIONAL
PLANNING



CONDITIONS CAN
CHANGE RAPIDLY.

Monitor forecasts,
soil moisture and river
flows. Plan ahead.

4



SEVERE

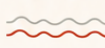
- Drought entrenched
- Water restrictions active
- Feed deficits
- Irrigation systems under pressure
- Elevated wildfire danger



SOIL MOISTURE



RIVER FLOW



IRRIGATION



FIRE WEATHER



SOIL MOISTURE



RIVER FLOW



WATER STORAGE



FIRE WEATHER



SOIL MOISTURE



RIVER FLOW



IRRIGATION



EVAPOTRANSPIRATION



SOIL MOISTURE



RIVER FLOW



IRRIGATION



WESTERLIES



3



SERIOUS

- River restrictions possible
- Pasture stress increasing
- Water storage concerns
- Fire-weather days increasing



2



ELEVATED

- Frequent foehn NW winds
- Increasing evapotranspiration
- Early irrigation pressure
- Feed buffers becoming important



1



WATCH

- Dry September
- Early soil moisture decline
- Increased westerlies
- Planning phase



MONITOR
FORECASTS &
CLIMATE DRIVERS



TRACK SOIL
MOISTURE &
RIVER FLOWS



MANAGE WATER
STORAGE &
ALLOCATION



BUILD FEED
BUFFERS
EARLY



PREPARE FOR
FIRE-WEATHER
RISK

INCREASING OPERATIONAL PRESSURE

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Severe dry zone — plan for major operational disruption

Gisborne, all of Hawke's Bay, eastern and central Wairarapa, Tararua east, Marlborough (Awatere and inland), dryland Canterbury (North Canterbury hill country, Banks Peninsula, foothill fringe), inland Otago (Central Otago, Maniototo, Ida Valley), eastern North Otago.

- Finish the cheap preparation this month: feed budget to March, contracts booked, bank/processor/contractor conversations opened, destocking triggers written down — mechanical, not emotional, when they fire.
- Move early, move once: light stores and surplus classes off in September–October into a functioning market. The 1997 lesson is that the early-vs-December price spread was the whole margin; the 1878 lesson is that stock left on failing country fail with it.
- Water: audit every trough, line and backup now; capital storage where feasible; irrigation users confirm allocation rules and restriction protocols before spring.
- Fire readiness in place by the end of September — and run it off wind forecasts, not temperature. Wind-driven fire in cured fuel moves fast on days that do not feel dangerous; machinery discipline is the control you own.
- Wind-chill planning alongside dry planning: shorn stock and newborns in a violent westerly spring. Shearing timing, shelter, paddock selection.
- Pasture renewal toward deep-rooted, drought-tolerant species (lucerne, cocksfoot, plantain) — and treat late summer as the pinch: budget feed to carry through February–March, not just to Christmas.

Moderate dry zone — plan for tighter feed, not crisis

Eastern Northland and Auckland, eastern Waikato and Hauraki, eastern Bay of Plenty and East Cape fringe, mid-Manawatū, coastal North Canterbury, eastern Southland inland, coastal and South Otago (monitor — the transition zone runs through here).

- Feed reserves built at winter prices; contracts locked before the severe-zone demand pushes the market.
- Lighter stock classes identified for earlier movement; premium stock finished first.
- Stock water reliability checked — moderate zones still produce stock water emergencies in extended dry spells.
- Northland-specific: the subtropical dry band firmed in the August runs — treat the northern dry lean as strengthening, and hold water discipline through the February–March tail even if early summer looks adequate.
- Monitor rather than commit: if your district's spring rainfall runs normal through October, you can stand most of this down. That is the design — cheap if wrong, cheap if right.

Windy and mixed zone — the working-days problem

Wellington and the Cook Strait corridor, Manawatū corridor, coastal Taranaki, Nelson (Waimea/Moutere), Canterbury Plains irrigated platforms, Wairau Plains arable.

These districts may see rainfall anywhere from below normal to near normal — but all of them get the wind, and in a changeable westerly regime the binding constraint is workable days, not water alone.

- Book contractors earlier and with more flexibility than feels comfortable; take the first workable window — in this regime there is frequently no better one later.
- Spray programmes rescheduled around wind; aerial work windows will be scarce; tight-interval crops need contingency plans.

- Irrigators: night and early-morning application is materially more valuable this season — drift and evaporation losses in wind are water you paid for; rotation-change triggers agreed on soil moisture, not the calendar.
- Shelter, structures, glasshouses, young-tree stakes and trellis inspected and repaired before the equinoctial peak, not after the first damaging event.
- Wind-rub joins sunburn as a first-order fruit quality risk — shelter integrity is this season's crop insurance.

Wet and excess-moisture zone — the opposite problem

All of the West Coast, western Southland and the Fiordland fringe, Golden Bay/western Tasman, western Taranaki coast.

- Drainage cleared, culverts checked, races and gateways fixed in August — before saturation, not after.
- Pugging management is the profit lever: sacrifice paddocks identified in advance, deferred grazing planned, contractor cost budgeted for harder access.
- Effluent storage headroom checked now — saturated ground halves your irrigation options for months.
- Compressed harvest and extraction windows: take them when offered; book freight in clear stretches.
- Consider the market: this zone may carry feed surpluses in a season of eastern deficit — surplus silage and grazing support will be worth more than usual sold north and east.

Alpine and high-country snow/melt zone — new this revision

South Island high country both sides of the divide, the Mackenzie, Central Otago and Southland lakes districts, and operators on the Clutha, Kawarau and southern floodplains.

A westerly El Niño loads snow onto the alps, and the record-strength scenario loads it further. In 1877/78 the southern story was not drought — it was 445,000 sheep lost to snowstorms and the Clutha flood of September 1878 when the melt came. At what we still expect to be far more moderate intensity, the same two-sided risk applies:

- High-country lambing: plan for late snow events inside a warm windy spring — shelter, paddock selection, and a weather-watch discipline through September–October.
- Snowpack awareness: heavy winter–spring snow loading extends stock risk and shifts the melt; watch snowpack reports the way eastern farmers watch soil moisture.
- Floodplain operators: a snow-rich alpine spring followed by warm rain-bearing westerlies is the flood mechanism — stock movement plans and river-level watch through the melt, especially October–December.
- The favourable flip side: alpine-fed irrigation and hydro storage are well supplied on this pattern — water security arguments for the season lean on exactly this snowpack.

THE PRINCIPLE THAT RUNS THROUGH ALL FIVE ZONES

Favour reversible preparation over irreversible commitment for as long as you can. Feed contracts, bookings, water audits, shelter repair, written triggers and an early cull of genuinely surplus stock are cheap if the season turns out mild. Wholesale destocking and capital decisions wait for November, when the season shows its hand. The record strength of this event does not change that sequence — it changes how seriously you take the cheap steps, and August is the month they are cheap.

9. Confidence, and What Would Change This Outlook

High confidence

- A very strong — likely record-class — El Niño will be in place through summer 2026–27; the ocean side is now observed, not forecast.
- Westerly and southwesterly flow will dominate from spring through summer, peaking first in spring, with fronts and southwest wind changes that increase localised thunder and hail risk, particularly in the east.
- West Coast, alps and far south wetter than normal; eastern South Island drier; hydro catchments well supplied.
- Spring temperatures above normal nationwide, inside a windy, changeable regime with sharp cold interludes.
- Wind run and evaporative demand east of the ranges well above normal.

Moderate confidence

- The severity of eastern drought — the direction is confident, the magnitude is not, and the record event-strength widens the top end.
- Eastern North Island drying, and the northward reach of the subtropical dry band toward Northland by mid-summer.
- Summer temperatures near normal in the south — with a newly modelled cool-side lean that awaits the nine-model check.

Lower confidence

- How fully New Zealand receives the event — still the single largest uncertainty, now genuinely two-sided: the Pacific's cool background argues for damping; the record event strength argues it gets overwhelmed, as in 1877/78.
- Whether a mid-summer circulation break occurs, as in 2015/16.
- Exactly which districts within the dry zone are worst affected; polar outbreak frequency through spring.

Between now and the September update we are watching

- The mid-September nine-model international comparison — confirmation or moderation of the record escalation is the September headline question.
- Whether the windy-westerly pattern holds in the new runs, or shifts toward the more dangerous blocked-ridge template as the event strengthens.
- Whether the positive Indian Ocean Dipole crosses its threshold by early September — it carries part of the spring dry-lean for the eastern North Island.
- Whether eastern New Zealand rainfall genuinely runs below normal through September — the first real verification of the whole outlook.



BOTTOM LINE FOR DECISION-MAKERS

The ocean event is now likely to be the strongest in at least 150 years. The New Zealand season we expect is still the windy, dry-east, wet-alps summer described in May — but the chance of that pattern arriving harder, faster and drier in the east has risen materially, and the preparedness steps in the decision calendar should be treated as more urgent, not more optional. The difference between 1878 and 2026 is not the ocean. It is that you are reading this six months before the peak. Use the time.

10. Staying Ahead of This Season

El Niño is not a single weather event. It is a pattern that, once established, persists for months. The most important consequence for New Zealand farming is not any individual storm or heat day — it is the accumulation: weeks of westerly flow, months of below-normal eastern rainfall, a season's worth of high evapotranspiration, an extended period during which the usual rhythm of the New Zealand summer is suppressed.

The good news is that this is also why the event is forecastable. Once the ocean warms and the atmosphere couples to it, the pattern becomes resistant to disruption. That gives operators a relatively long planning horizon, and means that decisions made now will carry through to actual on-farm conditions in five to ten months' time.

But the planning horizon is only useful if it is updated. Models refine their estimate as the ocean state evolves; soil moisture changes weekly; the marker points in Section 7 will trigger or not trigger over the coming weeks and months. The recommended posture is disciplined, paced preparation: establish the strategic framework now, build operational reserves through winter, monitor marker points through spring, and execute as conditions evolve.

This report sets that framework. The Blue Skies Weather Seasonal and Six-week Outlooks keep it current.

10.1 The Blue Skies Outlook

The Outlooks are the live counterpart to this report. Where this document is a snapshot at the August 2026 issue date, the Outlooks update weekly for six weeks ahead, and monthly for the seasons ahead — reflecting fresh model runs, the current Pacific Ocean state, and observed conditions across the 13 New Zealand forecast regions.

The Outlooks are built around three things this report cannot provide on its own:

- **Continuous update.** Monthly revised seasonal outlooks reflecting the latest model runs and ocean state, with weekly six-week updates between. The forecast you receive in October will be informed by data not yet available today.

- **Risk and probability information.** Events are framed in terms of likelihood of occurrence and with credible alternative scenarios flagged. The Outlooks are not a forecast in the daily-weather sense — they are a risk management and planning tool for your farm or operation.
- **Regional and sector specificity.** Detail at the level of your operation — your region, your sector, your catchment — beyond what fits in a static document covering all of New Zealand.

10.2 Subscription to The Outlook

It's easy to sign up with your email address and credit card at bswx.substack.com. You can choose the free tier (a few paragraphs only, and no extra reports like this one) or the paid subscription (full price \$395/year) which gives you access to everything produced — the seasonal outlooks, the six-week outlooks, and reports like the one you are reading now.

10.3 Custom and consulting work

Beyond the standard reports, Blue Skies offers tailored work for operations and organisations with specific exposures or scale:

- **Catchment and scheme-specific briefings.** Tailored outlooks for irrigation schemes, water user groups, and regional councils — with the model output and downscaling specific to your hydrology and operational decisions.
- **Sector-specific briefings.** For viticulture cooperatives, kiwifruit grower groups, processor advisory teams, and similar — with the analysis pitched to the operational and quality-management decisions that sector actually faces.
- **Farm-level consultations.** One-on-one work with individual operations carrying high seasonal exposure. Typically combined with a subscription so the relationship continues through the season.

11. Next Steps

- **The next update to this report is due in mid September 2026**, after the mid September nine-model comparison and at the point where the season commits.
- **The Blue Skies Seasonal and Six-Week Outlooks** keep this framework current between updates — monthly for the seasons ahead, weekly for the six weeks ahead, across all thirteen regions with the Fiordland hydro catchments treated separately: an annual subscription is likely to pay for itself many times over in a high risk season like this. <https://bswx.substack.com>
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