Six Thousand Miles of Warm Water and Your Spring Planting

Somewhere in the equatorial Pacific, a pool of warm water roughly the size of Australia is building. The Niño 3.4 monitoring region is already above the El Niño threshold and climbing. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) gives an 88% chance of a strong event and a 63% chance of a Super El Niño, with sea surface temperatures more than 2°C above normal. Only three have occurred in the modern record: 1982-83, 1997-98 and 2015-16 writes Simon Fox of Emerald Research.

But what does a patch of warm Pacific Ocean have to do with a field of broccoli in Lincolnshire? Quite a lot, potentially.

Strong El Niño episodes can push the Atlantic jet stream south, increasing the flow of mild, wet and windy weather across the UK from November onwards. This can sometimes be followed by a colder, more blocked pattern in January and February.

Crucially for vegetable growers, research also shows a statistical link between El Niño winters and above-average spring rainfall across southern England and into northern Europe.

For winter vegetables still in the ground, including leeks, brassicas and root crops awaiting lifting, a mild, wet autumn and early winter can increase disease and slug pressure, complicate harvesting and damage field conditions for the following crop. Waterlogged soils lose structure, while trafficking on saturated ground can create compaction that takes years to correct.

For spring-planted crops, the risk may be greater. If the historical pattern is repeated, a wet March and April could coincide with the establishment of potatoes, carrots, onions and brassica transplants. Delayed planting compresses the growing season, pushes harvest into higher-risk weather windows and reduces yield potential before crops have emerged. On heavier land, growers may be unable to travel for days or even weeks.

There is also a global dimension. El Niño can disrupt Asian monsoon rainfall, reduce grain production in Australia and parts of South America, and tighten commodity markets, including fertiliser and energy. Existing disruption around Hormuz could add further pressure to nitrogen supplies and UK input costs through 2027.

None of this is certain. El Niño is only one driver, UK effects are indirect and variable, and every event develops differently. However, the probability and historical pattern are strong enough to justify planning now.

Where there is a choice, prioritise better-drained, lighter fields with less flood history for spring planting. On land vulnerable to waterlogging or erosion, establish a cover crop before autumn rains arrive. Cereals or mustard can help protect soil structure, reduce surface capping and maintain drainage pathways.

Review autumn cultivations too. Well-timed subsoil loosening, while the ground is dry enough to shatter rather than smear, could determine whether a field is workable in March. Above all, resist travelling on saturated soil; compaction created in December may still restrict rooting depth in July.

The growers who cope best with a wet winter are not necessarily those with the most powerful tractors. They are those who decided in August which fields to protect, which to sacrifice and which to leave alone until conditions were right. ◆

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