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Corpus Christi gets drought reprieve as rains, promise of strong El Niño offer hope

Inflows at Lake Texana — and hope for a strong El Niño — are extending water supply timelines for the hard-hit coastal city amid ongoing Texas drought.

By **Dylan Baddour, Emily Salazar**, *Inside Climate News, South Texas Public Broadcasting*

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Corpus Christi's largest remaining reservoir, Lake Texana, is currently 55% full and projected to hit 30% this summer.
Dylan Baddour/Inside Climate News



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Corpus Christi gets drought reprieve as rains, promise of strong El Niño offer hope

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CORPUS CHRISTI — Recent rainfall in South Texas has pushed back the projected date of emergency water restrictions in Corpus Christi by three months amid growing hope that a powerful global climate phenomenon this year could wash away the region's historic drought.



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Lake Texana, the smallest of Corpus Christi's three reservoirs, rebounded from record lows last month when it received its first inflows in eight months. Worst-case projections in mid-April showed [the lake going dry](#) by summer. New projections show it should last at least until early next year.

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"We are pleased to share the positive news," Nicholas Winkelmann, chief operating officer of Corpus Christi Water, [said last week](#).

It's one small step in a regional water crisis that has developed over decades. But the short bridge that recent rains provided goes a long way to helping the region narrowly [avoid disaster](#), local water planners say. Expectations of a powerful "super El Niño" event this year suggest that intensely wet weather could return to the Coastal Bend region this fall, potentially putting water into the region's largest reservoirs, which have fallen to critical levels.

El Niño is a cyclical climate pattern driven by warm currents in the Pacific Ocean that shift jet streams and weather worldwide. Typically, El Niño has brought cooler and wetter weather to the Gulf Coast in late fall and

winter. This year, record warm water in the Pacific Ocean [could produce the strongest El Niño pattern in a century.](#)



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Forecasts from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Climate Prediction Center indicate "increased probabilities of a strong to very strong El Niño possible this fall."

Earlier this year, water planners in Corpus Christi worried their reservoirs could empty before El Niño appeared to save them. The recent boost to Lake Texana significantly lowers that likelihood, according to John Michael, an engineering firm executive who has spent 44 years working on water infrastructure in the region.

"We've just got to get through this year," said Michael, local vice president of Hanson Professional Services, an engineering firm with offices around the country. "I'm much more optimistic today than I was three months ago."

Rising lake levels bring hope

The city of Corpus Christi initially projected a "[Level 1 water emergency](#)" in November. As drought deepened, the city said in March that the emergency could come [as soon as May](#). Then in April, it said the [emergency would come in September](#).

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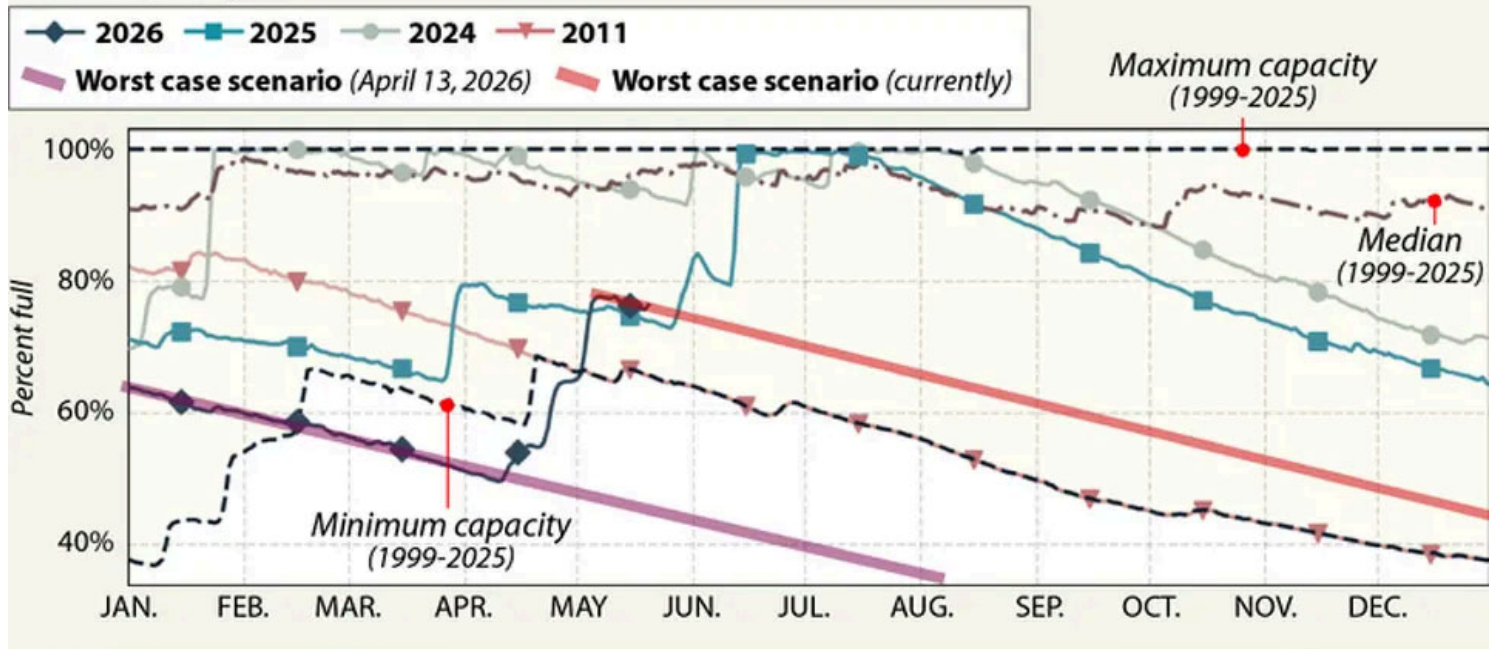
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Spring Rain Lifts Lake Texana From Historic Lows

By mid-April, Lake Texana was on track to empty by August if its eight-month dry streak persisted. Repeated rainstorms in recent weeks have pushed the worst-case timeline to depletion until early 2027.

LAKE TEXANA CAPACITY

Percent full, select years



URCE: Texas Water Development Board

PAUL HORN / Inside Climate News

Lake Texana capacity
Inside Climate News

If levels continue to rise in Lake Texana, 100 miles northeast of Corpus Christi and linked to the city by pipeline, it could meet the region's domestic and industrial water needs well into next year. By that time, planners hope El Niño will end five consecutive years of record-breaking heat and drought.

Dry spells in Texas have been known to conclude with deluges, said Matt Lanza, a longtime Houston meteorologist and co-founder of the website Space City Weather.

"We've had some false starts the last couple years," he said. "We are hopefully beginning to see the end of the drought in South Texas, but only time can tell."

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Narrowly avoiding a water disaster doesn't mean that Corpus Christi has solved its water crisis. The region's largest source of water, the Choke Canyon Reservoir, has received three minor inflow events and zero major inflow in the last 15 years, according to Texas state climatologist John Nielsen-Gammon. The next-largest reservoir, Lake Corpus Christi, hasn't logged inflows in five years.

Both reservoirs combined are about 8% full, as the region's industrial complexes continue to draw large volumes of water daily. A return of moderate rainfall could keep Corpus Christi from emptying its main reservoirs, but it wouldn't likely fill them up anytime soon.

"We are in drought, but we also have the water shortage," said Juan Peña, lead meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Corpus Christi. "Drought is ... short-term. The water shortage is more long-term."

At Mother Nature's mercy



The city of Corpus Christi is seen on March 4.
Dylan Baddour/Inside Climate News

For now, Corpus Christi remains at the mercy of rain. Almost all of the city's emergency water supply projects are hung up with complications and delays. Last week, a state administrative judge [sent the permits](#) for Corpus Christi's largest emergency project, in Sinton, about 25 miles north, into a hearing process that could take years.

The city had previously said it needed the project to start producing by November and was already laying pipeline.

Corpus Christi also [drilled emergency wells](#) along the Nueces River but found the water saltier than expected. Now the city is urgently advancing plans for one of the largest groundwater desalination plants in the country, which could treat up to 21 million gallons per day of brackish aquifer water for Corpus Christi's supply.

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"The project is critical to avoid the next stage of our drought contingency plan, which is a Level 1 Water Emergency," [Winkelmann](#) told the Texas Senate Committee on Water, Agricultural and Rural Affairs during [a hearing](#) at the state capital last week.

However, Winkelmann said, that project also lacks permits.

The Corpus Christi City Council is set to vote June 2 on a \$978 million plan to revive the seawater desalination plant [canceled in September](#). That project remains years from completion.

That's why a strong El Niño brings the best chances of salvation for Corpus Christi. The record-breaking Texas drought of 2011-2014 ended with the onset of El Niño. Then, 2015 became Texas' [wettest year on record](#). On Memorial Day weekend in 2015, [catastrophic flooding](#) tore through the Texas Hill Country and the town of Wimberley.

Successive years saw disastrous flooding across Texas, including in Houston in 2015, 2016 and 2017.

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“Every one of those years we had devastating flooding,” said Greg Waller, an operational hydrologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Fort Worth. However, he cautioned, “no two events are exactly alike,” and past weather patterns offer no guarantees for the future.



Water sits 30 or more feet below the base of a fishing pier at Lake Corpus Christi on April 28.
Dylan Baddour/Inside Climate News

And that period did not refill Corpus Christi’s reservoirs entirely. Choke Canyon hasn’t been full since 2008. Not even a strong El Niño is guaranteed to solve Corpus Christi’s water problem.

“I think it will help,” said Pat Fitzpatrick, atmospheric sciences program coordinator at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. “I don’t know if we will get out of the drought that easily.”

This report is published in partnership with Inside Climate News, a nonprofit, independent news organization that covers climate, energy and the environment. Dylan Baddour is an Austin-based reporter for ICN covering the energy sector and environmental justice. Emily Salazar is director of digital content at KEDT in Corpus Christi.

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