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The area west of Bethany Curve is a high priority for Santa Cruz public works crews making repairs. (Will McCahill / Lookout Santa Cruz)

SANTA CRUZ

With El Niño looming, Santa Cruz city crews rush to tackle West Cliff repairs ahead of coming winter



BY MAX CHUN

Source: [Lookout Santa Cruz](#)



The City of Santa Cruz Public Works Department is preparing for the winter by prioritizing West Cliff Drive repairs and performing maintenance on the San Lorenzo River levee to ensure its capacity is sufficient to handle increased water flow in the event of a rainy winter. That could come true, with an El Niño pattern looming in the Pacific Ocean.

OCT 2, 2023 | 5:25 AM



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The City of Santa Cruz Public Works department is gearing up for what could potentially be another rough winter due to the El Niño climate pattern that officially [began in June](#).

City officials say that while preparation for the winter will not vary much from the usual approach, public works is prioritizing [repairs to damaged sections of West Cliff Drive](#) to make as much progress as possible before bad weather forces crews to stop working.

The El Niño weather phenomenon is associated with the unusual warming of surface waters in the eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean, and tends to occur every few years. The most recent major El Niño event occurred in 2016. It is known to bring colder, wetter winters to areas like Southern California, the Southeast United States and the Pacific Northwest. Although effects around the Central Coast are harder to predict, the region does see slightly above-normal amounts of rainfall across all El Niño years.

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The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's latest prediction puts at 70% the chances that this year might evolve into a "strong" El Niño, which means a higher chance of powerful storms, floods and erosion. That doesn't necessarily guarantee that Santa Cruz will be hit hard, but it does increase the probability of noticeable impacts in areas with a history of harsh effects from El Niño events.

National Weather Service meteorologist Dalton Behringer said that other weather patterns in the atmosphere can interact with an El Niño to either intensify or suppress the phenomenon.

"In short, it's really not just up to El Niño. It is a very strong driver of weather for us in the U.S., but it can be up to several other ocean atmospheric connections that can enhance or tamp it down," he said.

As El Niño officially begins, what might the effects look like in Santa Cruz County?



Behringer said that in a few weeks, the Central Coast might begin seeing a cooler, wetter pattern, and the more drastic weather would be observable within about two months: "January to February would be the peak that we would see with those effects, but they can linger into the spring and early summer for some regions."

But even if El Niño comes and goes without any major local impacts, city public works assistant director Kevin Crossley said the department is in a better position to handle any issues that could arise this winter.

"Is that going to guarantee that something won't get worse that's already a problem, or if new problems won't crop up? Absolutely not," he said. "But I think we've got the right people, equipment and materials on hand to respond to those in as quickly a manner as we can."



Storm surge in January severely damaged portions of West Cliff Drive in Santa Cruz.

Crossley said that while the department is “winterizing,” or preparing for the winter season, it is not approaching the season any differently than it normally would, other than focusing on West Cliff repairs before bad weather halts progress and performing essential work along the San Lorenzo River.

He said that vegetation management and “ripping” along the San Lorenzo River levee are two processes that public works does annually to prepare for winter. Vegetation management involves removing excessive plant growth along the levee, and ripping requires a bulldozer to remove sediment from areas where it has accumulated. Both efforts are meant to prevent flooding during heavy rains by ensuring there is enough capacity for water to flow freely.

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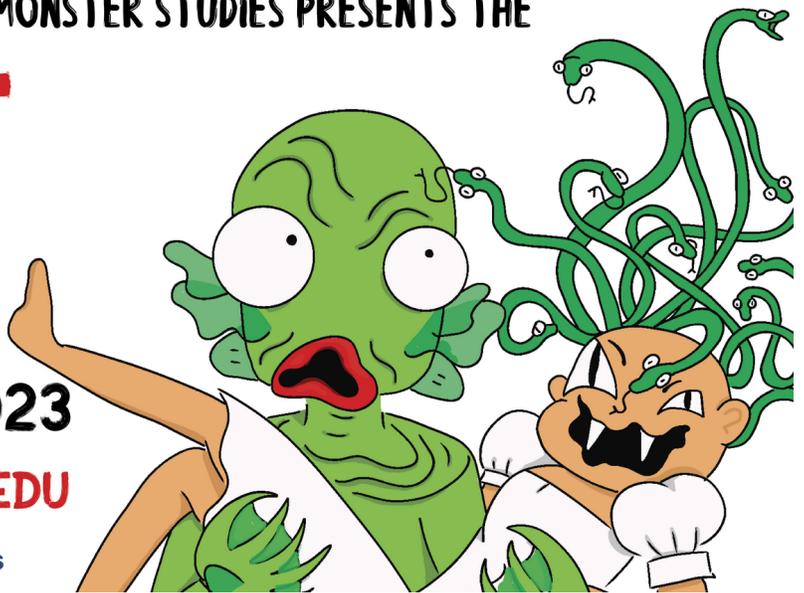
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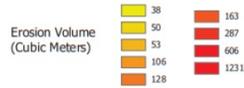
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As for West Cliff Drive, Crossley said that the highest priority is the section of eroded street west of Bethany Curve (labeled 1016 on the West Cliff Drive Erosion Volume Estimates graphic) because that requires crews to work in the tidal zone — a dangerous area if the seas are rough. He said he hopes that crews can construct the necessary new walls to fortify the road and move on from the tidal zone before weather causes a work stoppage.

West Cliff Drive Erosion Volume Estimates



Data courtesy of USGS. Erosion data is an estimate.



A map of eroded sections of West Cliff Drive. Public works is prioritizing site 1016 on the lower left side. (Via City of Santa Cruz)

“Once we’re about 10 feet above the high tide line, things are a lot more protected,” he said, adding that, in theory, crews can finish the new walls by the end of December barring poor weather. “But there is going to be a point in time where there’s bad enough weather and surf activity to where we cannot be productive.”

Crossley said that the department would have loved to start this work earlier in the year, but as with any project, there are many different variables to manage.

With some West Cliff-area repairs still a year out, Westside residents push for better traffic safety measures



“Whether it’s funding, permits or getting an excavation and shoring plan, there are things happening behind the scenes that prevent us from proceeding with repairs on a quicker timeline,” he said. “I think we’re just as frustrated as anybody else about the fact that we’re getting a late start this year.”

Though Crossley said there is little a public works agency can do to prevent storm damage and erosion from happening, the department’s new familiarity with intense storm damage and the presence of a contractor actively working in the area on repairs puts them in a proactive position and gives them a much better chance at a fast response time.

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“If we start to see either the work sites or parts of the coastline beginning to unravel, we’ll have the right people present to help deal with it,” he said. “I’m optimistic that we’ll have the right resources mobilized, because we’ve had this experience already.”

And although specifics surrounding local El Niño effects and their timeline remain murky, Behringer said that, given how unusual a winter like this past one is historically, a repeat of [this past winter’s atmospheric river deluge](#) is unlikely, but not out of the question.

“I wouldn’t think we’ll see a repeat of last year,” he said. “But there’s always the chance that we could deal with that magnitude or something close to it.”

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MAX CHUN



Max Chun is a locally grown reporter with an eye for community activism, human interest stories, and anything Santa Cruz.

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