



CALIFORNIA
STUDENT EMERGENCY
RESPONSE NETWORK

El Niño Preparedness Guide

A Resource Guide for
California Public Schools

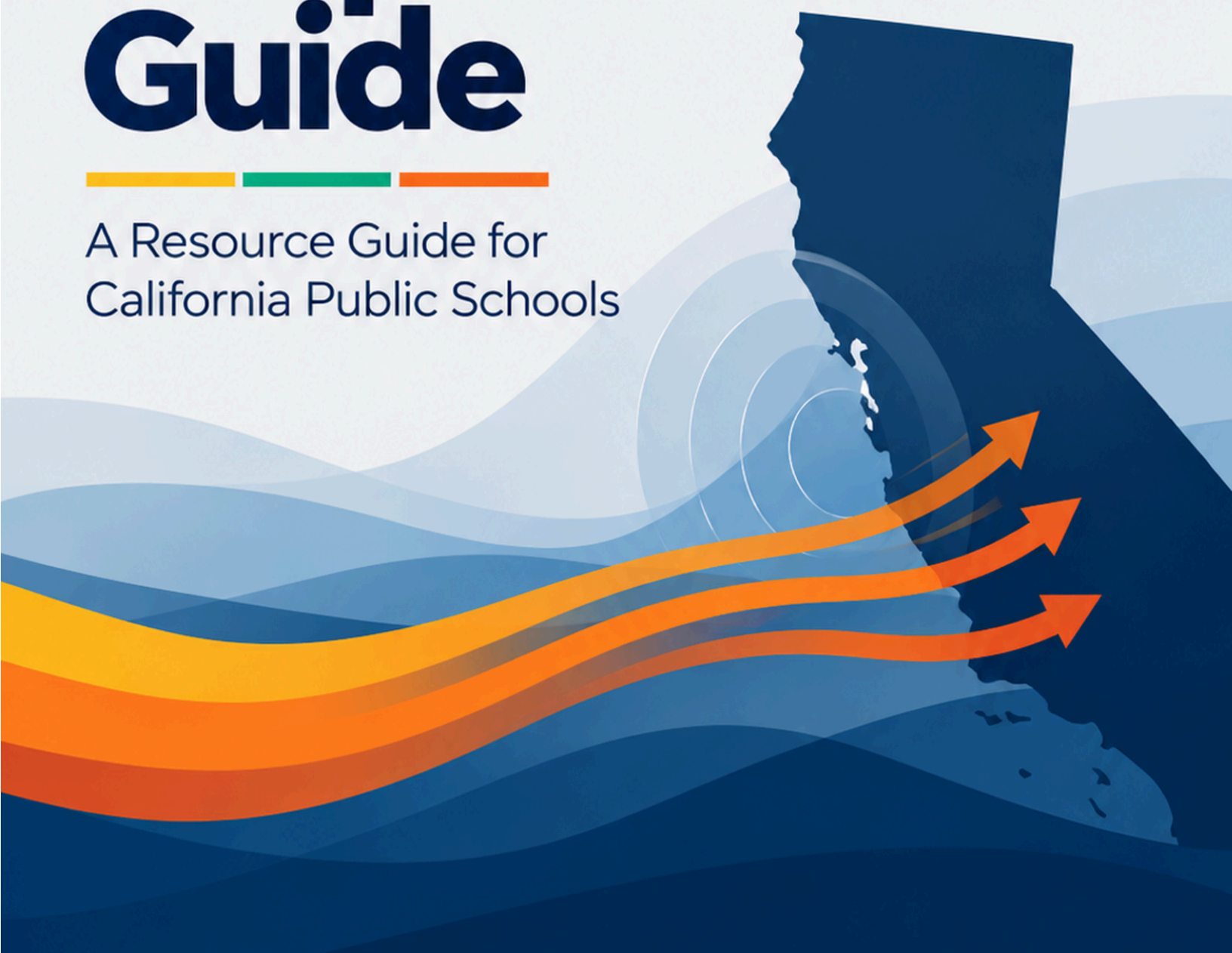


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EL NIÑO PREPAREDNESS GUIDE

A Resource Guide for California Public Schools

Introduction

California schools are essential community institutions. During emergencies, they must protect students and staff, maintain essential services when possible, communicate with families, and coordinate with local emergency management partners.

El Niño is here and strengthening. As of October 2026, federal forecasters give a greater than 90% chance of a very strong El Niño this fall and winter and a 75% chance that it reaches historic strength, according to the Governor's Office. Governor Newsom has already [proclaimed a state of emergency](#). Coastal effects have already begun: the Governor's Office reports that Kelvin waves have raised sea levels and that El Niño-fueled Pacific storms have sent strong waves into the California coast.

El Niño does not guarantee a wet winter, a specific amount of rainfall, or a particular disaster in any community. It does raise the likelihood of intense, repeated storms. That is a timely reason for local educational agencies (LEAs) to review emergency plans, address known vulnerabilities, and prepare for a range of impacts now, before the major anticipated impacts in January 2027.

Why This Matters for Schools

- About one in five California schools is in a FEMA-mapped moderate-or high-flood-risk area (source: [EdSource](#)).
- The March 2023 storms closed at least 178 schools.
- Planada Elementary (Merced County) flooded in 2018 and again in 2023, losing 26 classrooms and 4,000 books, with rebuild costs of roughly \$12 million. The district had no flood insurance in 2018.
- Pajaro Middle School (Monterey County) flooded when a levee failed in March 2023 and did not reopen until 2024.
- A school in the Sunol Glen District (Alameda County), rated low flood risk by FEMA, sustained about \$1.8 million in damages when a normally small creek overflowed.
- The decision to close school often rests at the local level (district superintendent), even though local agencies provide support.

This guide provides practical steps that schools can take before, during, and after severe weather. The information and suggestions it contains were pulled from established public resources which are available online and are listed in Section 9 at the end of this document. It is designed to complement existing school safety plans, district emergency operations plans, and local emergency management procedures, not replace them.

The goals of this guide are to help schools:

- Identify and reduce weather-related risks to students, staff, and facilities.
- Prepare for flooding, severe storms, power outages, and transportation disruptions.
- Strengthen emergency communications and family reunification procedures.
- Coordinate with COEs and local emergency management agencies.
- Maintain essential educational services and support recovery after an incident.

Roles at-a-Glance

Role	Priority actions before the first major storm	Start with
County and District Superintendents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirm the COE's 24/7 emergency contact and its Operational Area liaison. • Set closure-coordination expectations with districts. • Review insurance or joint-powers coverage. A new flood policy usually takes about 30 days to take effect. • Identify alternate sites and campuses likely to serve as community shelters. 	Sections 2, 3, 4, 6, 7
LEA Emergency Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete a site-by-site hazard and access review. • Tie alert and closure triggers to National Weather Service products and local conditions. • Confirm access to the School Emergency Reporting System (SERS) and county alert systems. • Run Tool B (tabletop exercise) before the first major storm. 	Sections 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
Site Principals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know the closure decision chain and your reunification plan. • Identify students and staff who need medical or accessibility support. • Keep staff and family contact lists current and supplies stocked. • Know how to report damage and unmet needs. 	Sections 2, 3, 4, 8

Section 1. Understanding El Niño and School Risks

What is El Niño?

El Niño is a periodic warming of sea surface temperatures in the eastern tropical Pacific Ocean that changes atmospheric circulation and weather patterns around the world. In California, it often brings more frequent and intense storms, though effects vary by location, event strength, and other atmospheric conditions.

Important: Flooding and severe winter weather can occur in California in any winter, whether El Niño is present or not. What El Niño changes is the probability of repeated storms, saturated soils, and elevated coastal water levels.

Staying Current

Outlooks change. Assign someone to check these sources weekly and brief district leaders:

- NOAA Climate Prediction Center monthly El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) update.
- The National Weather Service forecast office that covers your county.
- The California Nevada River Forecast Center (<https://www.cnrfc.noaa.gov/>)
- NOAA tide predictions, for coastal districts.
- Atmospheric river forecasts from the Center for Western Weather and Water Extremes (CW3E), which is working with the Department of Water Resources on this winter's planning.

For public-facing El Niño information, see [Listos California's El Niño page](#) and the UC Agriculture and Natural Resources El Niño resource listed in Section 9.

Potential Impacts on Schools

LEAs should consider the following hazards when reviewing their emergency plans.

Heavy rainfall and flooding

- Flooded campuses, parking lots, playgrounds, and athletic fields.
- Water intrusion into classrooms, portable buildings, and electrical systems.
- Inaccessible school entrances, bus routes, and evacuation routes.
- Damage to equipment, instructional materials, and school records.
- Sewer backups and contaminated floodwater.

Flash flooding, including desert areas

- Flash floods in washes, dips, and low crossings, including when it is not raining at the school site.

Debris flows, erosion, and landslides

- Increased runoff near hillsides, canyons, steep slopes, and recent wildfire burn scars. Hills and burn scars can still slide days after the rain stops.
- Damage to roads, retaining walls, utilities, and campus grounds.
- Isolation of schools or communities when access routes become unsafe.

Coastal impacts

- Coastal flooding, erosion, high surf, and elevated water levels.
- Kelvin waves can raise sea levels for weeks. Super king tides are expected from November through January. The worst case is a Kelvin wave, a peak king tide, and a significant storm occurring together.
- Disruptions to roads, facilities, and infrastructure near the coast.

Levee and dam concerns

- Aging levees can fail, as the 2023 Pajaro levee break showed. Know whether your campuses are in a levee-protected area and who maintains the levee.
- Districts downstream of dams should know the dam owner's emergency action plan. Cal OES reviews and approves dam emergency action plans.

Wind and infrastructure disruptions

- Fallen trees and branches, damaged structures, and downed power lines.
- Loss of electricity, internet access, heating, and telephone service.
- Downed trees blocking roads during the school day, which can prevent buses from leaving or parents from reaching campus.

Snow and mountain weather

- Snow accumulation, hazardous mountain roads, and blocked bus routes.
- Roof loads on buildings, and staff shortages and transportation disruptions.

Power outages and utility interruptions

- Loss of refrigeration, lighting, communications, and essential equipment.
- Interruptions to food service, medical support, and other school operations.

Localize the Risk

Each LEA should complete a site-by-site hazard review by a date determined by their leadership and share the results with its County Office of Education (COE). For each campus, ask:

- Is the school near a river, creek, drainage channel, coastline, steep slope, wash, or flood-prone roadway?

- Is the campus protected by a levee or located below a dam?
- Has the campus or surrounding area experienced flooding, erosion, or access problems in the past?
- Is the school near a recent wildfire burn scar or an area vulnerable to debris flows?
- Could students or staff become stranded if roads close? Is there only one road in, or a low-water crossing on the route?
- How would the campus operate without electricity, internet, or telephone service?
- What alternative routes, facilities, or operational arrangements are available?

Useful tools include [FEMA's Flood Map Service Center](#), [Cal OES's MyHazards](#) tool, and local emergency management hazard assessments.

A Map is a Starting Point, Not a Risk Assessment

- [MyHazards](#) data is approximate, and FEMA flood maps for some California counties are incomplete or out of date.
- A school rated low risk can still flood. Heavy rain after a drought, a blocked culvert, or a creek that normally runs shallow can overwhelm a site that was never mapped as vulnerable.
- Consult local emergency management, public works, facilities staff, and historical incident records. Ask your county emergency management agency whether flood maps account for El Niño-driven sea level rise and king tides.

Section 2. Campus and Facility Preparedness

Facilities teams should complete inspections by a date determined by their district leadership and correct identified hazards before significant storms arrive.

Pre-Storm Facility Readiness

Buildings and grounds

- Inspect roofs, gutters, downspouts, and storm drains. Repair roof leaks and clear drainage before the first storm.
- Identify low-lying areas that collect water.
- Clear debris from creeks, culverts, and drainage channels near campus. Where the channel is public, ask the county or city to clear it.
- Have qualified personnel inspect trees and remove hazardous branches.
- Secure outdoor equipment, loose materials, and movable structures. Check that portable classrooms are anchored and drained.
- Review the condition of retaining walls, slopes, and erosion-prone areas.
- Move critical equipment, records, and supplies out of low-lying rooms.
- Identify where sandbags and flood barriers can be obtained and stage them early. Supplies can run short.

Utilities and essential systems

- Identify electrical and mechanical systems vulnerable to flooding.
- Test generators under load. Confirm fuel supply, the service vendor, and which circuits the generator covers.
- Confirm emergency lighting and communication equipment are functional.
- Identify water, sanitation, heating, and ventilation dependencies.
- Establish procedures for reporting utility failures and unsafe conditions.

Transportation and access

- Identify flood-prone roads, bridges, and low-water crossings used by buses and staff.
- Confirm alternate routes with transportation personnel.
- Identify access points that emergency vehicles may need to use.
- Set the procedure and decision-maker for suspending unsafe bus routes.
- Determine whether any campus could become inaccessible during a major storm.

Corrective Actions

Each identified issue should have:

- A designated staff member responsible for follow-up.
- A target completion date.
- An interim safety measure if the problem cannot be corrected immediately.
- A process for escalating urgent hazards to district leadership.

Do not wait for the first major storm to discover that a drain is blocked or an access road is unsafe.

Insurance and Documentation

- Confirm flood coverage with your carrier or joint-powers authority. Most standard property policies do not cover flood, and a new flood policy usually takes about 30 days to take effect, so buy before the season peaks.
- Photograph and video each building, room, and major equipment item now, and store copies off site.
- Keep an inventory of costly equipment and its location, so it can be documented and moved if flooding is forecast.
- Identify the district contact who will file claims and keep damage and expense records.

Section 3. Student and Staff Safety

Districts should review their emergency operations plans and ensure that school-site personnel understand their roles and decision-making authority.

Closure and Delayed-Start Decisions

Name the decision-maker, a designated alternate if that person is unreachable, the information sources they rely on, and the deadline for decisions that affect bus runs and staff travel. Establish who evaluates weather information, transportation conditions, facility safety, staffing, and utility status.

Use the template below to build board-approved triggers. Thresholds are set locally and the entries here are prompts, not requirements.

Condition (definitions found on p. 29)	Questions to answer	Decision Maker
Flood Watch or Flash Flood Watch for the area	Are access routes, drainage, and staffing ready? Should after-school and evening events be reviewed?	Emergency Manager or designee with Superintendent
Flood Warning or Flash Flood Warning	Can buses and staff travel safely? Is the campus flood-exposed? Should dismissal, delay, or closure be considered?	Superintendent or designee
Closures of roads, bridges, or low-water crossings on bus routes	Should affected routes be suspended? How will families on those routes be notified and students supervised?	Transportation director or designee
Debris-flow warnings or evacuation orders near campus	Are the campus or its access routes in the affected area? Follow instructions from emergency officials.	Superintendent with county officials
Coastal flood advisory, high surf, or king tide	Is the campus or its access exposed to tidal flooding? Does timing around high tide change the schedule?	Emergency manager or designee

Power or communications outage	Do heating, water, sanitation, food service, and notifications still function? What are the criteria for modified operations or closure?	Site Principal with district operations/ Superintendent or designee
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Evacuation and Sheltering

Identify when evacuation, relocation, or sheltering may be appropriate. Evaluate routes and assembly areas for flood exposure and other hazards, and do not stage students in flood-exposed areas. Name an alternate site on high ground for each flood-exposed campus and confirm it can be reached. Follow instructions from authorized emergency officials when an incident is underway.

Transportation Safety

Buses and district vehicles never enter flooded roadways. Water can be deeper and faster than it looks, and the road beneath may be washed out. If a route is blocked, turn around and use an alternate route or hold students on site.

Student Supervision

Plan for the possibility that students cannot be picked up at the usual time because roads are closed or families cannot safely travel. Set a minimum supervision standard of 24 - 72 hours covering food, water, sanitation, medication access, and staff relief. Your governing board or risk manager should choose the figure.

Family Reunification

Review procedures for releasing students to authorized adults, documenting reunification, communicating alternate pickup arrangements, and managing situations in which normal transportation is unavailable.

Students with Disabilities and Additional Support Needs

Include accessible evacuation routes, transportation, assistive devices, communication accommodations, medication and medical equipment needs, and continuity of required supports. Coordinate with student services personnel and families.

Staff Safety and Accountability

Confirm how staff receive emergency instructions, report their status, and communicate when they cannot safely reach a campus. Many staff live far from the campus where they work, so plan for reduced staffing.

Never Compromise Safety to Maintain a Normal Schedule

Operations should be based on current conditions and established decision-making procedures. No instructional day, event, or activity should take precedence over the safety of students and staff.

Make sure to plan for extracurricular activities, athletic events, field trips, adult education, and other programs that may continue outside normal school hours.

Section 4. Communications and Coordination

Reliable communications are essential before, during, and after severe weather.

Establish a Communication Plan

LEAs should confirm:

- Who monitors weather alerts and official emergency notifications.
- Who communicates decisions to principals, staff, families, and the public.
- Which systems are used for mass notifications.
- What backup methods are available if internet or cellular service fails.
- How messages reach families who do not have reliable internet access.
- How information will be provided in the languages families use and in accessible formats. The Governor's proclamation directs Cal OES to expand multilingual and accessible preparedness messaging, so check for materials you can adapt.
- Who is authorized to release information and correct inaccurate reports.

Use multiple methods where feasible, such as text messages, telephone calls, email, district websites, and established local alert systems.

Alert Enrollment is Not Automatic

- Wireless Emergency Alerts reach compatible phones in an affected area automatically.
- County emergency alert systems send text, call, and email notices only to people who sign up. Direct staff and families to the county sign-up links at calalerts.org or Listos California.
- Build enrollment into back-to-school and storm-season communications. Pajaro Valley USD has canvassed neighborhoods to encourage families to sign up.

Coordinate with Local Partners

Maintain current contacts for the following, and confirm them before storm season rather than during an emergency:

- County Office of Education and its Operational Area liaison.
- County or city emergency management.

- Local fire and law enforcement agencies.
- Public works, flood control, and transportation agencies.
- Levee and dam owners, where applicable.
- Utility providers.
- Public health and behavioral health partners.
- Other agencies identified in local emergency plans.

Report School Impacts

Establish a consistent process for reporting school closures and operational changes; flooding, facility damage, and unsafe conditions; transportation interruptions; utility and communications failures; student or staff safety concerns; and unmet needs requiring coordination or assistance.

CDE uses the School Emergency Reporting System (SERS) to track school status during disasters (<https://www3.cde.ca.gov/sers>). Make sure you have your district's (or COE's) Access Code in order to complete the SERS tracking data. Also follow your district, COE, county, and state reporting procedures.

Section 5. Power Outages and Continuity of Operations

Power outages may occur during storms or through Public Safety Power Shutoffs (PSPS). PSPS events are utility shutoffs to reduce wildfire risk, typically during dry, windy conditions. They are separate from storm-caused outages but can occur before the wet season starts, so plan for both. LEAs should plan for short interruptions and extended outages.

Continuity Planning Checklist

- Identify essential school functions that depend on electricity and review backup power capabilities and limitations.
- Establish backup methods for communicating with staff and families.
- Identify students and staff who depend on powered medical devices or other critical supports.
- Review food storage, refrigeration, and food service contingencies.
- Determine impacts on heating, ventilation, lighting, water, and sanitation.
- Establish procedures for securing buildings and protecting records.
- Define criteria for modifying operations, relocating activities, or closing a campus.
- Establish plans for instructional continuity when in-person school is not possible.

Generator Safety

Only trained and authorized personnel should operate generators or other backup power equipment. Follow applicable fire, electrical, and manufacturer safety requirements. Never operate a fuel-burning generator, grill, or camp stove indoors or in an enclosed space. Place generators outdoors and well away from windows, doors, and air intakes to prevent carbon monoxide poisoning.

For school-specific guidance, see the [CDE Public Safety Power Shutoff page](#) and PSPS FAQs listed in Section 9.

Maintain Essential Services

Determine how the LEA will address student meals and drinking water, special education and other essential student services, medication and medical equipment needs, family communications and student supervision, continuity of instruction, staff availability and relief, and protection of school records and critical data. Plans should identify which functions can continue, which require alternative arrangements, and which must be suspended if conditions become unsafe.

Section 6. CSERN, County Coordination, and Mutual Aid

No LEA can prepare for every emergency alone. The California Student Emergency Response Network (CSERN), an initiative of the CA County Superintendents, is a statewide coordination and readiness network. It exists to bring schools into the state's emergency management system. Schools serve as evacuation centers, reunification points, and community anchors, yet have historically been under-integrated into statewide emergency systems.

This section explains what CSERN can do for your COE, and where the CSERN Mutual Aid Agreement fits alongside your local emergency plans, your county Operational Area, and Cal OES.

How CSERN Can Help

CSERN supports COEs in three ways: **coordination** (a common way for County Offices of Education, or COEs, to ask for and offer help across county lines), **standardized tools** (shared procedures, templates, and forms), and **training** (common standards and exercises, so staff from different counties can work together).

What CSERN Does Not Do

- CSERN does not replace Cal OES, local emergency management, or district authority. It is not a response command entity, a mitigation lead agency, or a funding intermediary.
- The responsible local official stays in charge of the incident. Resources sent under the Agreement work under the requesting COE's operational control.
- Aid is voluntary. A providing COE does not have to deplete its own resources, and a request does not guarantee that help will be available.

Where the CSERN COE Mutual Aid Agreement Fits

The [CSERN Mutual Aid Agreement](#) (April 2026) lets COEs share personnel, equipment, supplies, communications, information systems, facilities, and transportation assets during an emergency when local capability is not enough. It is made under the California Disaster and Civil Defense Master Mutual Aid Agreement, follows SEMS and NIMS, and complements existing mutual aid agreements rather than replacing them.

Four things to know about the COE Mutual Aid Agreement:

- **The parties are COEs, not districts or other LEAs.** Each of California's 58 COEs may sign, and each represents the LEAs within its county. Only a COE that has signed can request or provide aid. An LEA that needs help beyond its own resources makes its request through its COE.
- **It applies when needs exceed capability.** A COE may request aid when an emergency exceeds its capabilities. It is not a first call for routine problems, and it does not replace 9-1-1, the local emergency operations center (EOC), or Cal OES channels.
- **It is voluntary and locally controlled.** No COE must deplete its own resources, and the responsible local official in the affected jurisdiction remains in charge.
- **It sets rules for cost, liability, and records.** See "Costs, liability, and records" below.

How the pieces fit together. The COE Mutual Aid Agreement is the rulebook: who can ask, what can be shared, and the terms for costs, liability, and records. The operational protocol and activation decision tree are the playbook for when aid is activated and who does what. The [Rapid Mutual Aid Request](#) is the tool that starts a request. Joint training and drills are the practice, and each COE agrees to take part.

Where Mutual Aid Sits in the Response Chain

Level	Who	What Happens
1. School site and district	Principals, district emergency managers	Follow the emergency operations plan and Comprehensive School Safety Plan. Use existing contracts, joint-powers authority coverage, and agreements with neighboring districts and local agencies.
2. County	COE, local EOC, county Operational Area	Coordinate county resources and information. Confirm how your district connects to the Operational Area. Mutual aid requests should be coordinated through the local EOC whenever applicable.
3. Education mutual aid	CSERN Coordinator and signing COEs	When a COE's needs exceed its capabilities, it asks other COEs for help through the Agreement.

Level	Who	What Happens
4. Region and state	Cal OES, through SEMS	Regional and state resources, the Master Mutual Aid system, and state and federal disaster assistance.

The levels are not a strict ladder. Life-safety emergencies go to 9-1-1 and local emergency services first, at every level, and a request under the COE Mutual Aid Agreement should never delay life-safety action or standard SEMS requests.

The COE Mutual Aid Agreement cites as its authority the Master Mutual Aid Agreement, Title 19 of the California Code of Regulations (section 2415), the California Emergency Services Act, the California Disaster Assistance Act, the Stafford Act, and Education Code sections 32280 to 32289.5 and 35295 to 35297.

How to Request Help

Only a COE can submit a request under the Agreement, so LEAs should alert their COE early, before a need becomes critical.

Step	What Happens	Who
1. Identify the need	The LEA documents the incident, the affected sites, safety concerns, actions already taken, and the help needed. Life-safety emergencies go to emergency services first.	LEA (district or site)
2. Notify the COE	The LEA contacts its COE through the designated emergency contact or Operational Area liaison. The COE clarifies the need and uses county and local resources first.	LEA, COE
3. Submit the Rapid Mutual Aid Request	If the need exceeds county capability, the COE's authorized official completes and signs the form. It goes to the CSERN Coordinator or delegated authority by phone, email, or EOC/WebEOC, and through the local EOC when applicable.	Requesting COE

Step	What Happens	Who
4. Match and confirm	CSERN works with COEs that may be able to help. A providing COE checks whether it can help without jeopardizing its own essential services and gives an estimated deployment time. The form records the status (pending, partially filled, filled, or unable to fill), who is providing what, and the confirmation sent back to the requesting COE.	CSERN Coordinator, providing COE
5. Deploy and manage	Resources report to the check-in location and work under the requesting COE's operational control, consistent with SEMS/NIMS. Providing-COE supervisors may stay with their units.	Requesting COE
6. Demobilize, document, and review	Either COE may ask to demobilize when conditions change. Track personnel hours, equipment use, supplies, dates and times, tasks, and contracts or purchase orders. Send the full Mutual Aid Request Form and cost documentation once the incident is stabilized. Settle costs as agreed (see below), then hold an after-action review (Section 7).	Both COEs

Have This Ready Before You Need It

The Rapid Mutual Aid Request asks for the information below. Gather it in advance so a first request takes minutes.

Form section	Information to have ready
1. Who, when, where	Requesting COE, contact and phone, date and time, the incident, and the area affected.
2. What you need	Resource or capability, quantity, key qualifications or equipment, needed-by time, and duration. Rate the urgency: immediate/life safety, critical operations, significant disruption, or other.

Form section	Information to have ready
3. Deployment	Check-in location, requested arrival, incident or EOC contact (name and phone), whether transport, lodging, and meals are needed, and safety considerations.
4. Command and coordination	EOC or incident command, SEMS/NIMS assignment, task or objective, and the local official in charge.
5. Cost	Whether reimbursement is expected (yes, no, or to be determined) and potential funding sources (FEMA Public Assistance, California Disaster Assistance Act, insurance, etc.).
6. Authorization	The authorized official's name, title, and signature, plus how and to whom the request is submitted.
7. CSERN and providing COE	Completed by CSERN and the providing COE: receipt, status, who is providing what, estimated deployment, and confirmation.

Costs, Liability, and Records

Review these terms with your risk manager and legal counsel before an emergency. This is a summary of the Agreement and is not legal advice.

- **Cost.** Mutual aid is generally provided on a goodwill basis without reimbursement unless the COEs agree otherwise. Unless they agree otherwise for a particular incident, the requesting COE may reimburse the providing COE for eligible costs, including overtime and wage additives, travel and per diem, supplies and equipment use, backfill needed to maintain essential services, and indirect costs up to legal limits. Settle this when the request is made (Section 5 of the Rapid Request form).
- **Billing and disputes.** The providing COE sends an itemized invoice within 90 days after demobilization, or as agreed. The requesting COE pays within 90 days of a complete invoice, or as agreed. Disputes go first to each COE's designee and then, if needed, to non-binding mediation by the CSERN Leadership Council.
- **Outside funding.** The requesting COE should pursue all eligible sources. FEMA Public Assistance and the California Disaster Assistance Act depend on a declared emergency or disaster and on documentation of the request and the resources provided. Neither is guaranteed.

- **Liability.** Public employees, including school personnel, who serve under the Agreement during a proclaimed emergency are Disaster Service Workers under Government Code section 3100 et seq., with the workers' compensation and other benefits provided by law. To the fullest extent the law allows, the requesting COE agrees to indemnify and defend the providing COE and its staff against claims arising from the assistance, except for losses caused by the providing COE's sole negligence or intentional misconduct. Each COE maintains workers' compensation, liability, automobile, and property coverage, through insurance or self-insurance.
- **Student information.** Follow FERPA, state law, and local policy when sharing student records or other personally identifiable information.
- **Records.** Keep the dates and times of the request and service, task descriptions, personnel hours (straight time and overtime), equipment use, supplies, and any contracts or purchase orders. Track costs to the level of detail the funding source requires.

Schools as Community Shelters and Resource Sites

Schools are often used as emergency shelters, rally points, and distribution sites. The Agreement expects each COE's plans to provide for using school facilities as disaster shelters, and Education Code section 32282, as cited in the Agreement, requires procedures that let agencies such as the American Red Cross use them for mass care. Before storm season, agree with county emergency management on which campuses may serve, what each needs (water, power, a sound roof, accessible entrances, road access), and who staffs and pays for operations. A campus that floods or loses access cannot serve this role, so factor shelter use into hazard reviews.

Using CSERN Before Storm Season

Who	Do this before the first major storm
County superintendents	Confirm that your COE has signed the Agreement and has named an authorized signer and an alternate. Share the Agreement and request process with your districts. Make sure your EOC and Operational Area contacts are current.

Who	Do this before the first major storm
Emergency managers	<p>Walk your COE and district leaders through the Rapid Mutual Aid Request using Tool B, and keep a pre-filled copy with your COE, EOC, and local-official-in-charge contacts. Confirm how to reach the CSERN Coordinator outside business hours. Schedule the minimum training standards (ICS-100, ICS-200, IS-700, and SEMS Introduction), and the CSERN Emergency Coordination Fundamentals course once it is available.</p> <p>CSERN Coordinator: Stacey Adler, sadler@cacountysupts.org; 760-709-6136</p> <p>California County Superintendents CSERN Liaison: Kindra Britt, kbritt@cacountysupts.org</p>
Site principals	<p>Know whom to call at your district and COE, and what information they will ask for. Report conditions and unmet needs early so the district can escalate before a situation becomes critical.</p>

After a storm, share lessons learned with your COE and with CSERN. The CSERN Leadership Council will review the Mutual Aid Agreement every year, and what counties learn this winter can improve the next version. CSERN also plans regional tabletop exercises in the near future to test mutual aid across counties.

Contact CSERN

For questions about the COE Mutual Aid Agreement, the request form, training, or CSERN tools, visit <https://www.cacountysupts.org/csern>. You may also contact Stacey Adler, CSERN Administrator (sadler@cacountysupts.org or 760-709-6136) or Kindra Britt, California County Superintendents CSERN Liaison at kbritt@cacountysupts.org.

During an incident, requests should come from the COE's authorized official to the CSERN Program Administrator or delegated authority.

Section 7. Recovery and Restoration

Recovery begins as soon as it is safe to assess impacts and identify what is needed to restore essential services.

Before Reopening a School

Confirm that appropriate personnel have evaluated:

- Building and structural conditions.
- Consider whether the [Division of State Architects](#) needs to be involved for any repair/rebuild issues.
- Electrical systems and other utilities.
- Drinking water and sanitation, including any contact with sewage or contaminated floodwater.
- Roofs, grounds, access roads, and parking areas.
- Hazardous debris, contaminated water, and mold. Prompt cleanup limits mold growth, so avoid delays caused by waiting for insurance adjusters where possible, and document damage first.
- Heating, ventilation, and other essential building systems.
- Safe access for students, staff, buses, and emergency vehicles.

Reopening decisions should follow district procedures and instructions from public safety, building, environmental health, or other authorities. Update your school status in SERS when closures or reopenings occur.

Restore Educational Services

Plan for communication about reopening, delays, or continued closure; alternative instructional arrangements where needed; replacement of damaged materials and equipment; continuity of meals, special education, counseling, and student support; support for displaced students, families, and staff; and documentation of damage, expenses, and response actions.

Funding and reimbursement

- **Insurance or joint-powers coverage:** notify your carrier promptly and keep all records.
- **Attendance credit:** [CDE Form J-13A](#) is used to receive credit for days and minutes lost to an emergency.
- **State and federal disaster assistance:** FEMA Public Assistance and the California Disaster Assistance Act are administered through Cal OES. Eligibility depends on the disaster declaration, so contact Cal OES Recovery early.

- **Child nutrition:** see CDE's disaster guidance for [Child Nutrition Programs](#) on claiming and reimbursement.
- **Documentation:** photograph damage before cleanup. Keep receipts, work orders, staff time, and a log of decisions.

Support Student and Staff Well-Being

Severe weather and displacement can disrupt routines and increase stress. Communicate calmly, provide age-appropriate information, connect students and staff with available support, and monitor the needs of those directly affected. Resources include CDE's Coping with Tragedy and Help for Students in Crisis pages, the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, and the SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline (1-800-985-5990).

Conduct an After-Action Review

Hold a short debrief within 72 hours and complete a written after-action review within 30 days. Ask:

- What worked well?
- Where were students, staff, or facilities most vulnerable?
- Were communications timely, accessible, and accurate?
- Did staff understand their responsibilities?
- Were transportation, reunification, and continuity plans effective?
- Were assistance requests handled through the appropriate channels?
- What changes should be made before the next emergency?

Assign an owner and due date to each corrective action.

Section 8. Ready-to-Use Tools

Tool A: School Storm-Readiness Checklist

Before the storm season

- ☐ Review campus hazards and flood exposure.
- ☐ Inspect buildings, drainage, trees, and utilities.
- ☐ Confirm flood insurance coverage and photograph and inventory property.
- ☐ Review emergency operations and closure procedures, including the decision-maker and alternate.
- ☐ Update staff, family, COE, and agency contacts.
- ☐ Confirm staff and families are signed up for county emergency alerts.
- ☐ Review transportation alternatives and reunification procedures.
- ☐ Confirm continuity plans for essential services.
- ☐ Identify students and staff requiring additional accommodations.

Before an approaching storm

- ☐ Monitor official forecasts and local emergency alerts.
- ☐ Recheck vulnerable campus areas and address hazards where safe.
- ☐ Move equipment and records out of low-lying areas.
- ☐ Confirm staffing, transportation, supplies, and communications.
- ☐ Brief school leaders and staff on current procedures.
- ☐ Communicate expectations and contingencies to families.
- ☐ Confirm the process for reporting impacts and requesting assistance.

During an incident

- ☐ Follow official warnings and authorized emergency instructions.
- ☐ Protect students and staff from floodwater, downed wires, and other hazards.
- ☐ Account for students and staff according to established procedures.
- ☐ Communicate operational changes through approved channels.
- ☐ Report impacts and unmet needs to the appropriate partners.
- ☐ Document key decisions and actions.

After the storm

- ☐ Assess damage before reopening.
- ☐ Verify essential utilities, sanitation, and access.
- ☐ Communicate reopening decisions and available services.

- ☐ Document impacts, expenses, and assistance received.
- ☐ Update SERS and file insurance and assistance claims.
- ☐ Hold a debrief within 72 hours and an after-action review within 30 days.
- ☐ Assign corrective actions and follow-up dates.

Tool B: Thirty-Minute Tabletop Exercise

Scenario: Severe storm, flooded access road, and power outage.

Purpose: Practice school and COE coordination during a storm that affects student safety, transportation, communications, and continuity of operations.

Participants: District administrators, school-site leaders, facilities personnel, transportation staff, communications personnel, and COE emergency management representatives.

Facilitator notes: Assign a facilitator and a note-taker. Read each segment aloud, pause for discussion, and keep to time. Record gaps on a shared sheet. Use your own district names, roads, and contacts to make the scenario realistic.

Minutes 0–5: Initial situation

Heavy rain is forecast to continue through the afternoon. A Flash Flood Warning has been issued. Water is accumulating near a school entrance, and a nearby roadway has been reported as flooded.

Discussion questions: Who is monitoring official information? Who evaluates campus and transportation safety? What information is needed before making operational decisions?

Minutes 5–12: Conditions worsen

A school bus route becomes impassable. Several families call asking whether they should pick up their children. Water begins entering a low-lying portion of the campus.

Discussion questions: Who determines whether students remain, relocate, or are dismissed? How are students accounted for and supervised? How are families notified of changing arrangements? What accommodations are needed for students with disabilities or medical needs?

Minutes 12–20: Power and communications fail

The campus loses electricity and internet service. Some staff cannot access the normal notification system.

Discussion questions: What backup communication methods are available? How are students and staff kept informed? Which essential services can continue safely? When should the district contact its COE for coordination or assistance?

Minutes 20–27: Additional support is needed

The district determines that it may need assistance with transportation, temporary facilities, supplies, or technical expertise. The county has asked whether any campus can serve as a community shelter.

Discussion questions: What assistance is needed, and when? What information should be included in the request? Which coordination and mutual aid procedures apply? How will requests, approvals, and resource delivery be tracked? Can the campus serve as a shelter, and what would it need?

Minutes 27–30: Identify improvements

Ask participants to identify two strengths in the current plan, three gaps requiring follow-up, one immediate corrective action, and the person responsible for each action and its target completion date.

The purpose is to improve coordination and decision-making, not to test individual performance.

Tool C: Sample Family Communication

Adapt this message to your district and translate it into the languages your families use.

Subject: School Weather Preparedness and Emergency Communications

Our district is reviewing emergency procedures in preparation for potential severe winter weather. Heavy rain, flooding, high winds, power outages, and transportation disruptions may affect school operations.

Please make sure your contact information is current and take these steps:

- Sign up for your county's emergency alerts (insert your county's alert link). County alerts are not automatic.
- Watch for district updates by (insert the method your district/county uses: text message, email, website, social media, phone line). We will use these channels to share delayed starts, closures, early dismissals, and changes to pickup arrangements.
- Keep your emergency contact information up to date with the school office.

- Discuss reunification arrangements with your family and make sure the school has the names of authorized pickup adults.
- Tell the school about any change in your child's medical, accessibility, or emergency support needs.
- Never drive or walk through floodwater, and stay away from downed power lines. Turn around and find another route.

If a storm affects school operations, we will share updates through the channels above. Decisions will be based on current conditions and the safety of students and staff.

Thank you for helping us prepare.

Your District/COE Name

Website and contact information

Tool D: District Readiness Self-Assessment

Use this scale to identify gaps:

- **1 - Not started:** No established procedure.
- **2 - In development:** Work has begun, but significant gaps remain.
- **3 - Established:** A procedure exists and responsibilities are assigned.
- **4 - Exercised:** The procedure was exercised within the past 12 months and improvements were documented.

Preparedness area	Rating (1-4)	Follow-up action and owner
Campus hazard assessment		
Facility inspection and corrective actions		
Closure, delay, and evacuation decision-making		
Student supervision and reunification		
Accessible emergency procedures		
Family and staff communications, and alert enrollment		

Preparedness area	Rating (1-4)	Follow-up action and owner
Power outage and continuity planning		
Transportation contingencies		
COE and emergency agency coordination (including Operational Area link)		
Mutual aid request procedures		
Insurance, risk financing, and documentation		
Child nutrition and essential student services continuity		
Recovery, reopening, and reporting (SERS, J-13A)		
Student and staff well-being support		
Tabletop exercise and corrective actions		

Prioritize life-safety gaps, assign responsibility for follow-up, and revisit the assessment periodically.

Section 9. Curated Resource Directory

Review the most current versions of these materials and confirm local procedures with your COE and emergency management partners. Verify each link before publication.

El Niño and General Preparedness

Resource	Link	Use
Listos California: El Niño in California	https://www.listoscalifornia.org/el-nino-in-california/	Public preparedness actions by region
Listos California: Sign up for alerts	https://www.listoscalifornia.org/alerts/	County alert enrollment for staff and families
Listos California: County emergency information resource sheets	https://www.listoscalifornia.org/resources/county-emergency-information-resource-sheets-english/	County-by-county contacts and alert systems
Listos California: Resource Hub	https://www.listoscalifornia.org/resources/	Materials to share with families and communities
Governor's Office: El Niño preparations (Oct. 9, 2026)	https://www.gov.ca.gov/2026/10/09/ahead-of-el-nino-this-winter-governor-newsom-prepares-california-for-winter-storms-and-flooding-impacts/	Current state actions and flood preparations
UC Agriculture and Natural Resources: El Niño facts	https://ucanr.edu/blog/green-blog/article/el-ninofacts	Scientific context
California Coastal Commission: El Niño	https://www.coastal.ca.gov/climate/extreme-weather/el-nino	Coastal flooding, erosion, and emergency permits
CW3E (Scripps Institution of Oceanography)	https://cw3e.ucsd.edu/	Atmospheric river forecasting
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration	https://www.noaa.gov/understanding-el-nino	Understanding El Niño and ENSO

School Emergency Management

Resource	Link	Use
California County Superintendents (CCS): California Student Emergency Response Network (CSERN)	Disaster Preparedness CA County Supts	A statewide coordination and readiness network that integrates schools into California's emergency management framework.
CCS: Business Administration Recovery Guide	Emergency Recovery Guide for Business Officials at COEs	
CCS: Technology Services Recovery Guide	Technology Services Disaster Recovery Resources	These resources are designed to help K-12 education technology departments create and implement a working Disaster Recovery Plan (DRP) for their organization.
Butte COE: Emergency Communications Resource Guide	BCOE Emergency Communications Guidebook	The Emergency Communication Guide addresses media relations, the communication team role and provides templates for responding to situations quickly and effectively.

San Mateo COE: The Big Five	The Big Five - Coalition for Safe Schools and Communities	The Big Five is a common emergency plan adopted by all San Mateo County school districts and law enforcement agencies.
Kern County Emergency Plan for Schools	Emergency Planning Rubric for Schools	County emergency plan for schools.
CDE: School Disaster and Emergency Management	https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ep/	Central page for school emergency guidance
CDE: Floods	https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ep/flood.asp	School flood resources and links
CDE: School Closure Considerations	https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ep/schoolclosurecons.asp	Closure decision guidance
CDE: Landslides and Mudslides	https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ep/landslidemudslides.asp	Debris-flow preparedness
CDE: Public Safety Power Shutoff	https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ep/publicsafetyshutoff.asp	Power shutoff planning
CDE: Wildfire Resources	https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ep/wildfires.asp	Wildfire and burn-scar guidance
CDE: Educational Resource List (PDF)	https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ep/documents/esteresourcelist.pdf	Resources before, during, and after floods
CDE: School Emergency Reporting System (SERS)	https://www3.cde.ca.gov/sers	Report school status during disasters
CDE: Disaster Guidance for Child Nutrition Programs	https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/disasterguidance.asp	Meal service and reimbursement

CDE: Help for Students in Crisis	https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/mh/studentcrisis/help.asp	Mental health and wellness resources
CDE Emergency Services Team	EmergencyServices@cde.ca.gov	Questions on school emergency management
Cal OES: School Emergency Planning and Safety	https://www.caloes.ca.gov/office-of-the-director/operations/planning-preparedness-prevention/planning-preparedness/school-emergency-planning-safety/	Hosts California Emergency Management for Schools guide
U.S. Dept. of Education REMS: K-12 Flood Fact Sheet (PDF)	https://rems.ed.gov/docs/K12FloodFactSheet_508C.pdf	Flood preparation steps for schools

Hazard Information and Alerts

Resource	Link	Use
FEMA Flood Map Service Center	https://msc.fema.gov/portal/home	Flood hazard maps (check map dates)
Cal OES MyHazards	https://myhazards.caloes.ca.gov/	Local hazard exposure (approximate)
National Weather Service	https://www.weather.gov/	Forecasts, watches, warnings
California Nevada River Forecast Center	cnrfc.noaa.gov	River forecasts
Cal OES: Get Alerts	https://calalerts.org	Find county alert sign-ups
Cal OES	https://www.caloes.ca.gov/	State emergency management information

Resource	Link	Use
Cal OES: Dam Safety Planning	https://www.caloes.ca.gov/office-of-the-director/operations/planning-preparedness-prevention/planning-preparedness/dam-safety-planning/	Dam emergency action plans
Department of Water Resources: Flood Preparedness	https://water.ca.gov/What-We-Do/Flood-Preparedness	Maps, videos, and flood resources
Ready.gov: Make a Plan	https://www.ready.gov/plan	General emergency planning
Ready.gov: Floods	https://www.ready.gov/floods	Flood safety
Ready.gov Kids: Floods	https://www.ready.gov/kids/disaster-facts/floods	Age-appropriate flood information

Recovery, Funding, and Well-Being

Resource	Link	Use
Cal OES: Public Assistance	https://www.caloes.ca.gov/office-of-the-director/operations/recovery-directorate/recovery-operations/public-assistance/	FEMA and state funding for public entities
Cal OES: California Disaster Assistance Act	https://www.caloes.ca.gov/office-of-the-director/operations/recovery-directorate/recovery-operations/public-assistance/california-disaster-assistance-act/	State assistance for local governments
Cal OES: Hazard Mitigation	https://www.caloes.ca.gov/office-of-the-director/operations/recovery-directorate/hazard-mitigation/	Mitigation project funding

Resource	Link	Use
FloodSmart.gov	https://www.floodsmart.gov	Flood insurance information
EPA: Mold in Schools and Commercial Buildings	https://www.epa.gov/mold/mold-schools-and-commercial-buildings	Mold remediation
CDC: Floods	https://www.cdc.gov/floods/about/	Floodwater safety and health
American Red Cross: Flood Safety	https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies/flood.html	Before, during, and after a flood
SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline	1-800-985-5990	Free, confidential crisis counseling
988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline	988	Call or text for crisis support

Definitions

Blizzard: Falling or blowing snow that frequently reduces visibility below one-quarter mile, with sustained winds or frequent gusts of at least 35 mph, lasting at least three hours.

Burn Scar: An area affected by wildfire where altered soil and reduced vegetation can increase runoff, flash flooding, and debris-flow hazards.

California Emergency Support Functions (CA-ESFs): Groups of agencies and other partners organized by related responsibilities to coordinate preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery.

Coastal Flood Watch: Coastal flooding with significant impacts is possible.

Continuity of Operations (COOP): Planning that supports the continued performance of essential functions and critical operations during an incident.

Debris Flow: A fast-moving landslide containing water, mud, rocks, vegetation, and other debris.

El Niño: Above-average ocean surface temperatures in the central and eastern tropical Pacific that influence atmospheric circulation and weather patterns.

El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO): The interacting ocean and atmosphere pattern in the tropical Pacific that includes El Niño, La Niña, and neutral conditions.

Emergency Operations Center (EOC): A location where officials coordinate information and resources to support incident management.

Emergency Operations Plan (EOP): A maintained plan describing how a jurisdiction responds to a range of potential hazards.

Evacuation: The organized and supervised movement of people from dangerous or potentially dangerous areas, including their reception and care in safe areas.

Flash Flood: A sudden, rapidly developing flood that can occur within minutes to hours, including in locations where rain is not falling.

Flash Flood Warning: Rapid flooding is occurring or imminent. People in threatened areas should immediately move to higher ground or another safe location.

Flood Advisory: Flooding may cause inconvenience and potentially dangerous conditions requiring caution.

Flood Warning: Flooding is occurring or is expected to begin imminently.

Flood Watch: Conditions are favorable for flooding. Flooding is possible within the identified area.

High Surf Warning: Breaking waves pose an especially serious threat to life and property within the surf zone.

High Wind Warning: Strong sustained winds or powerful gusts are expected or occurring and may threaten life or property.

Incident Command System (ICS): A standardized structure for organizing personnel, facilities, equipment, procedures, and communications to manage an incident at the scene.

Mutual Aid Agreements / Assistance Agreements: Agreements that provide a mechanism for obtaining emergency personnel, equipment, materials, and services from other organizations or jurisdictions.

Operational Area (OA): A county and the political subdivisions within its geographic boundaries, forming an intermediate level of California's emergency management organization.

Preliminary Damage Assessment (PDA): An assessment used to determine the magnitude of damage, incident impacts, and resulting unmet needs.

Preparedness: A continuing cycle of planning, organizing, training, equipping, exercising, evaluating, and correcting deficiencies to improve emergency coordination and response.

Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS): California's system for managing emergencies involving multiple agencies or jurisdictions. Its five levels are field, local government, operational area, region, and state.

State Operations Center (SOC): The Cal OES center responsible for coordinating state resources in support of regional emergency operations and providing statewide situation information.

Winter Storm Warning: Heavy snow or significant ice accumulation is expected or occurring. Issuance criteria vary by location.

Acronyms

CA-ESF: California Emergency Support Function

Cal OES: California Governor's Office of Emergency Services

CDE: California Department of Education

COE: County Office of Education

COOP: Continuity of Operations

DWR: California Department of Water Resources

EAP: Emergency Action Plan

ENSO: El Niño–Southern Oscillation

EOC: Emergency Operations Center

EOP: Emergency Operations Plan

FEMA: Federal Emergency Management Agency

ICS: Incident Command System

LEA: Local Educational Agency

NIMS: National Incident Management System

NOAA: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

NWS: National Weather Service

OA: Operational Area

PDA: Preliminary Damage Assessment

SEMS: Standardized Emergency Management System

SOC: State Operations Center