El Niño returns, could help snuff out hurricane season

After almost a three-year absence, forecasters are predicting El Niño will develop over the next few months, which could portend a quiet end to the hurricane season.

"We're not officially there yet," AccuWeather senior meteorologist Brett Anderson says, "but we are trending towards an El Niño."

An El Niño climate pattern is a periodic warming of tropical Pacific Ocean water that affects weather around the world.

The likely development of a full-fledged El Niño episode means that Atlantic hurricane activity will probably be suppressed in 2012, according to Weather Underground meteorologist Jeff Masters, as a result of the strong upper-level winds and high wind shear these events typically bring to the tropical Atlantic.

Wind shear tends to tear apart hurricanes before they develop.

Anderson says that El Niño will most likely form by September, which is the heart of the Atlantic hurricane season.

Depending on how quickly it develops, AccuWeather reports there could be a quick shutdown of tropical storm and hurricane activity during the latter part of the Atlantic season in September and October.

However, there could still be storms in August and early September, before the full effects of El Niño come into play.

Right now, after a quick start to the hurricane season with four named storms in May and June, July has been remarkably quiet in the Atlantic, with no named storms. This would be the first July since 2009 with no named storms, Masters reports.

Overall, other than a quiet hurricane season, the greatest weather impacts in the USA from El Niño tend to occur in winter, reports Michelle L'Heureux, a meteorologist with the Climate Prediction Center.

Usually, she says, El Niño produces wetter and cooler-than-average weather across the southern tier of the USA and warmer and drier-than-average conditions across the northern half of the country, which is not good news for the parched upper Midwest.