El Niño and the Paraná River: Navigation Outlook, Draft Implications and Dredging Preparedness

Updated as of 31 October 2026

Rising water levels on the Paraná River are changing navigation conditions and port planning. Greater water availability can ease draft restrictions associated with low-water periods, while stronger currents, pressure on navigation aids and sediment accumulation create additional operational challenges.

Over the coming months, attention will focus on the progression of the high-water conditions and maintenance capacity along Argentina's main navigation corridor, the Vía Navegable Troncal (VNT). The dredging fleet reinforcement announced by Vía Navegable Argentina (VNA) forms part of that preparation.

Conditions at the end of October

The Instituto Nacional del Agua (INA), Argentina's national water institute, reported a **gauge level of 3.85 metres at Rosario on 30 October**, below the local **high-water alert threshold of 5.00 metres**. Reported levels at Santa Fe and Paraná were 4.30 metres and 4.29 metres, respectively.

Conditions were more severe upstream: Corrientes, Barranqueras, Goya and Reconquista recorded levels above their respective alert and evacuation thresholds. Along the Santa Fe–Paraná–Rosario reach, INA described a gradual rise and expected the upward trend to continue. Its outlook identified the possibility of approaching or exceeding alert levels at Paraná and Santa Fe during the second week of November. Source: INA daily report, 30 October 2026.

These measurements are **water-surface elevations relative to local gauge datums**, rather than channel depths or permissible vessel drafts. The alert threshold concerns high-water risks to riverside areas. Rising water can therefore improve available navigation depth while increasing exposure along islands and riverbanks.

The outlook for November and December

The official bulletin published on 29 October assigns a 100% probability to the persistence of El Niño conditions during November–December 2026. This describes the expected climate phase; it does not establish certainty about a specific river level or flooding at Rosario.

The bulletin also anticipates that the effects of the current flood wave in the upper and middle Paraná Delta will become most pronounced towards late November, with levels above seasonal norms. Source: official hydrometeorological bulletin No. 9.

For Rosario, local media reported statements from the Argentine Naval Prefecture attributing to INA an estimate of approximately **4.80 metres during December**, close to the 5.00-metre alert threshold. This remains a projection subject to revision. Reports differ on whether that level could be reached around mid-December or towards the end of the month.

Implications for vessel draft and cargo intake

It is a mandate that low-water conditions reduce available depth, potentially requiring vessels to leave with smaller cargo parcels or complete loading at other ports. Recovering river levels can improve cargo intake potential, provided conditions throughout the voyage permit it.

However, an increase in gauge level does not automatically translate into an equivalent increase in permissible operating draft. The assessment must account for the limiting depths along the route and the required **under-keel clearance (UKC)**: the safety margin between the vessel's keel and the riverbed.

VNA also warns that stronger currents and drifting vegetation during high-water events can affect navigation aids. As water levels subsequently recede, sediment deposition may reduce available depths, particularly in areas such as the Emilio Mitre Channel.

The announced operational response

According to VNA, its contingency plan includes reinforcing the five dredgers already deployed along the waterway. The announced schedule comprises:

• **Late November:** expected arrival of *Francisco di Giorgio*, a trailing suction hopper dredger mobilized from Singapore.

• **Mid-December:** planned deployment of *Ibn Battuta*, a cutter suction dredger being prepared in Croatia.

• **Early January 2027:** possible deployment of *Alvar Nuñez Cabeça de Vaca* and/or *Diogo Cão*, depending on operational requirements and hydrological conditions.

These are conditional additions; their operational deployment should not yet be treated as confirmed.

The stated objectives are to expand maintenance capacity, address dredging requirements and prepare sedimentation basins in the Emilio Mitre Channel area. The programme is intended to preserve navigability. Its announcement does not, by itself, establish a higher authorized draft or guarantee unrestricted passage.

Priorities for the months ahead

For port operators, shipping companies and cargo players, planning through the end of 2026 and into early 2027 should bring together three elements: updated hydrological forecasts, surveyed depths at critical reaches and the actual deployment of the announced dredging equipment.

The operational implication is clear: higher river levels may create opportunities for greater cargo intake, but loading and departure decisions must remain grounded in verified navigation conditions. Maintenance planning must also account for the subsequent recession of the river and the associated sedimentation risk identified by the operator.

The challenge will be to translate improved water availability into reliable navigation conditions through monitoring, timely dredging and operational readiness.