

Media Representation of ENSO in the Southeast US

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News media are key players in the social construction of perceptions and knowledge of weather and climate and important channels for the communication of climate information to lay audiences. Media representational choices “frame” public understandings and shape cultural salience of information by stimulating awareness of and interest in scientific findings. At the same time, however, they can obscure certain aspects and contribute to confusing and distorted interpretations, which may result into inaction or inappropriate responses.

This poster reports on a study that explores how the relationship of El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) and climate variability is portrayed in the news-media that is available to farmers in Georgia. This study analyzes articles published during the last five years in the farm-oriented press, rural county newspapers, and mainstream press in Georgia. The study is part of the Southeast Climate Consortium (SECC), a multi-disciplinary research project that aims to produce climate predictions for decision makers in agriculture and natural resource management in the Southeast U.S. Discourse analysis of news articles is complemented by interviews with news writers and climate scientists who originated the climate information to understand their decisions relative to how to explain and represent ENSO-related climate variability to the different readerships.

The analytical variables express aspects of representation of climate phenomena and climate science, including: a) how ENSO is framed (event or process, normal pattern or anomaly, cyclical variability or climate change); b) how it is measured (strength, maturity, speed, etc.); c) what climatic parameters are mentioned (precipitation, temperatures, or extreme weather events); d) what temporal and spatial frames of reference are invoked (previous climate events, other of the country or world); e) what impacts (agricultural, economic, environmental, or lifestyle) are emphasized and whether they are positive or negative; and f) whether response strategies are discussed. Through discourse analysis we also identify representational strategies used to convey the probabilistic aspect of ENSO-based predictions and to underscore the credibility of the scientific information. Results will be used to improve the “fit” between the SECC climate outlooks and public understandings of ENSO and its effects in the Southeast U.S.

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