



PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION
WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

25th PAN AMERICAN SANITARY CONFERENCE 50th SESSION OF THE REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Washington, D.C., 21-25 September 1998

Provisional Agenda Item 4.4

CSP25/10 (Eng.)
11 July 1998
ORIGINAL: SPANISH

HEALTH IMPACT OF THE SOUTHERN OSCILLATION (EL NIÑO)

The Southern Oscillation (El Niño) is notable for its wide geographic influence and prolonged extremes. The fact that El Niño is associated with extended climate events with large-scale effects makes it extremely important to the public health sector. The ability to project future El Niño events gives the public health sector the opportunity to prepare for and to better control the transmission of disease.

Both the health services infrastructure and basic sanitation services were damaged by El Niño in 1997-1998. At present, no concrete data are available that demonstrate that the incidence of infectious diseases is consistently and reliably related to El Niño events.

There is a need to develop a scientific agenda that will examine the impact of extreme events such as the Southern Oscillation (El Niño) on human and animal health, as well as on health infrastructure and services. Attention should be paid to the vulnerability of ecosystems to this phenomenon, how disease incidence will respond to extreme climatic events, and how health programs will adjust to changes in morbidity and mortality caused by climate change.

This document summarizes existing knowledge of the effect of El Niño on health. Much is known, but there is much more to be learned. The document was presented to the 122nd Session of the Executive Committee of PAHO to inform it of the latest data on the impact of El Niño and to seek input from the Committee on the role that PAHO should play in addressing the health effects that could occur due to this environmental phenomenon. As a result of the presentation and ensuing discussion, the Committee approved a recommendation that the Pan American Sanitary Conference adopt a resolution (CE122.R11) which is annexed to this document. Both the document and the proposed resolution are presented to the Conference for consideration and discussion.