

Forecaster: El Niño rains may arrive in late winter
San Diego Union-Tribune-11/4/09
By Robert Krier

The continued development of El Niño in the Pacific is encouraging to state weather-watchers and water managers. But the timing of the rains the weather phenomenon could bring may not be the best for replenishing California's depleted reservoirs.

Conditions favorable for El Niño have developed rapidly in recent weeks in the Central Pacific, said Klaus Wolter, a climate researcher at the University of Colorado. The sudden changes mean there's a better chance of a strong El Niño, which is a much more reliable indicator of a wet winter in California than a weak or moderate episode, Wolter said.

"A month ago, I would have said we'll have a weak event," Wolter said yesterday at a winter outlook workshop in San Diego hosted by the state's Department of Water Resources. "Now this El Niño event is firing on all cylinders," he said, though his assessment is rosier than that of many forecasters.

Wolter, who also works with the NOAA's Western Water Assessment team, said he expects the bulk of the heavy rains to hold off until late winter or spring. That could prolong the fire season for much of Southern California and create complications for resource managers.

Most of the state is off to a good start this rainfall season because of record rains that hit much of California last month, said Mike Dettinger, a researcher at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla and the U.S. Geological Survey.

"That storm was not just your garden-variety, October storm," Dettinger said. "It topped off the shallow groundwater."

But the state is still in a hole because reservoirs are lower than usual after below-normal runoff for three straight years.

An ideal situation for the state's water supply would be if storms kept coming every few weeks, Dettinger said. If there is a big gap between rains, as Wolter forecasts, much of the precipitation would go into replenishing groundwater supplies instead of flowing into reservoirs. And late-season or spring precipitation can cause flooding or other complications.

"We really do like the frozen kind of precipitation," said Jeanine Jones, California's interstate resources manager. "It stays up there in our reservoirs in the Sierra, then runs off in a nice, orderly fashion in the springtime."

Not all long-range forecasters are as bullish on El Niño this winter as Wolter. Michael McPhaden, a scientist at the NOAA's Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory in Seattle, concurs that El Niño has developed rapidly the past few weeks after languishing as a weak event for months. But the sudden surge doesn't mean it will continue to strengthen through the winter, McPhaden said.

"It has the potential to have some significant climate impacts around the world, with Southern California being among them," McPhaden said. "But the consensus (among forecasters) is that it will be moderate."

Dettinger said he is guardedly optimistic about the coming winter.

"We could get a real gangbuster year," he said. "But my optimism extends about as far as, we may get a normal year. A normal year would be all right. It's not going to bail us out ... but it would be a heck of a lot better than the alternative, which would be more of the drought."#

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/2009/nov/04/forecaster-el-nino-rains-may-arrive-in-late-winter/>

With caveats, forecasters say drought may end this winter

North County Times-11/3/09

By Bradley J. Fikes

After three years of drought, California just might escape a fourth one, but there's still a lot of uncertainty, water experts said Monday.

A rain-bringing El Nino condition appears well-established, speakers said at a workshop held in San Diego by the California Department of Water Resources. The weather pattern, which brings warm water to the eastern Pacific, doesn't guarantee rain in California, but it makes it more likely.

Although the forecast generally pointed to greater supplies of water, speakers mindful of the weather's notorious unpredictability hedged their prognostications with plenty of warnings that conditions could change for the worse.

Winter is the state's rainy season, recharging Northern California's reservoirs, which supply much of Southern California's water. Snow deposited in the Sierra Nevada melts during the spring and summer, further filling reservoirs.

So the next few months will determine whether 2010 is another dry year or if the drought will end.

But water officials say the state has a long way to go to recover from three years of lower-than-normal precipitation. Reservoirs are far below capacity. For example,

Oroville Reservoir is at 37 percent capacity, about 60 percent of its normal level. So conservation will continue to be needed, especially for arid Southern California, which is literally at the end of the pipeline from its water sources, from Northern California and the Colorado River basin.

El Nino is important because it tends to bring rain and snow to both these sources.

"I'm cautiously optimistic that we may get a normal year," said Mike Dettinger, a research hydrologist with the U.S. Geological Survey in San Diego. "I'm really dubious about whether we'll get a really good year."

A recent storm in Central California moistened watershed soils, making it easier for additional rain to flow into rivers and reservoirs, said Dettinger, who is also a researcher at UC San Diego's Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

Signs appear modestly positive for rain from El Nino, Dettinger and two other speakers said. But they disagreed somewhat on the weather condition's strength.

The El Nino is weak, said Timothy J. Brown, director of the Western Regional Climate Center in Reno. And even a strong El Nino doesn't always bring above-average precipitation, he said.

However, the latest signs are that the El Nino is strengthening, said Klaus Wolter, a research associate at the Earth Systems Research Laboratory at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Strong El Ninos more reliably bring water to Southern California, somewhat less often to Northern California, Wolter said. Weak El Ninos have much less effect.

"If you want water this winter, you really have to root for a strong El Nino," Wolter said. Moreover, the effects of a strong El Nino often persist into the spring, he said, bringing unseasonably late storms.

And other weather patterns across the planet, from the Azores to the Indian Ocean, also are linked to El Nino, Wolter said, and bode well for a wet winter for California.

"If El Nino is reasonably strong in the winter, don't be surprised if you get a wet spring," Wolter said. #

http://www.nctimes.com/business/article_16c3a116-c908-51b5-97b5-bc6cf0565498.html

Water could cost 30 percent more for Soquel Creek's 49,000 customers
Santa Cruz County Sentinel-11/5/09
By Shanna McCord

Showering, running the dishwasher and flushing the toilet could cost nearly 30 percent more for the 49,000 customers of the Soquel Creek Water District by January 2012 if a proposed rate hike goes forward.

Water officials say they need to collect an additional 9 percent each year for the next three years to "ensure a reliable and safe water supply" for the district, which stretches from Capitola to La Selva Beach.

They say the increase would help counter a drop in sales during the past year, largely due to customers cutting back about 13 percent on usage.

The additional money would go toward replacing old, unreliable wells and pumps, monitoring groundwater to prevent seawater intrusion and funding the district's \$2.5 million share of a desalination study with the Santa Cruz Water Department, district officials said.

There's also money designated in the district's \$19.5 million 2009-10 budget for four new trucks and two new full-time employees, including an information technology position that pays \$85,000 a year.

"Water is not becoming more available or cheaper," district board member Bruce Daniels said. "Some of the infrastructure in our district is 80 years old. Some things age because of time, not because you use them more or less."

The first 9 percent boost would start in January.

For the average household, the increase would change the bimonthly bill from \$104 to \$135 by January 2012.

Some water customers say this is not the time to raise the price of a basic necessity as many people are trying to weather job losses and pay cuts.

Some say the proposed hike is punishment for conserving water, as the district has cited lower sales as one reason for increasing rates.

Chris Mann, who lives in Seascape with his wife and three children, said he has cut his water bill by more than half during the past year by taking numerous steps to curtail use around the house.

Mann installed drip irrigation, bought a high-efficiency clothes washer and put low-flow heads on all the faucets. His family has become more diligent about turning off the water

while brushing their teeth and shaving. A timer has been placed on the showers to remind the kids to hop out after a few minutes, Mann said.

"After being asked to conserve, they come out with a rate increase to make up the difference," Mann, 47, said. "They're selling less water, so in return we're getting rewarded with a rate increase. We've just had enough, especially in this economy."

The proposed rate hike can be stopped if the majority of customers write a letter in opposition to the district, including their signature and parcel number, by Nov. 14.

The Santa Cruz Water Department, the largest water supplier in the county with 95,000 customers, implemented a series of rate increases in July 2004.

The price of water jumped each year until last January, when Director Bill Kocher put off the last tier because of the weak economy.

Kocher said he has yet to decide whether to ask the City Council for another increase next year.

"We need to look at our capital projects," Kocher said. "and whether we have to borrow or if we're in a position to pay-as-you-go."

Soquel Creek Water District's public hearing on the proposed rate hike is 7 p.m. Nov. 14 at Capitola Council chamber, 420 Capitola Ave. #

http://www.santacruzsentinel.com/ci_13717851?IADID=Search-www.santacruzsentinel.com-www.santacruzsentinel.com