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California drought blankets entire state; El Niño forecast dims

Newest predictions of an El Nino year fizzling

By Steve Scauzillo, San Gabriel Valley Tribune

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Not too long ago in this season of California's massive and extended drought, climate experts saw a small glimmer of hope on the horizon: Predictions for a wet El Niño season coming in the winter that would bring badly needed rain and relief to a parched state.

Now that glimmer is fading fast, and the drought has gotten even worse.

One hundred percent of California is in a severe drought, 77 percent is in an extreme drought and 33 percent is in an exceptional drought, according to a report released last week by the National Drought Mitigation Center in Lincoln, Neb.

“Those are remarkable numbers,” said Mark Svoboda, a climatologist and the center's monitoring program leader.

The [drought monitoring](#) team in Lincoln has never seen an exceptional drought since it started keeping detailed data in 1999. The D4 category — a foreboding maroon color on a California drought map — extends from Sacramento and the Bay Area through the Central Valley, Santa Barbara and Ventura counties.

Los Angeles County and counties south and east register a D3 for extreme drought, mostly because the region has more reservoirs filled to the brim to fight the drought, now in its third year, Svoboda said.

Predictions for a much-anticipated wet 2014-15 winter are waning.

“The El Niño had a very promising, dramatic surge in January, February and March, but now as we enter summer, all of a sudden it is disappearing,” said climatologist Bill Patzert, looking up from a dozen satellite images on his computer screen at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory near Pasadena. “The great wet hope is going to be the great wet disappointment.”

Patzert, who once was booed off the stage at an American Meteorological Society meeting in January 2007 for predicting an El Niño would fizzle, often goes against the scientific grain. However, that year, the El Niño, a warming of the ocean waters that often brings rain and sometimes flooding, had weakened as he said it would, resulting in the driest rain season in the history of Los Angeles, up to that time.

An exceptional drought

The movement from extreme to exceptional drought occurred this summer. A year ago, none of the state was in the exceptional or extreme drought categories, according to the drought mitigation center’s data.

How can California and the western states get worse? The categories count duration, which has lengthened, and demand, which spikes during the summer season, Svoboda said. The effects are becoming more noticeable, too, as more farmland lies fallow and supermarkets are recording higher prices for beef and produce.

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power is relying on the Metropolitan Water District for its water supply almost exclusively this year. But with only 3.6 inches of total rainfall in 2013, the driest in 135 years, the MWD is banking against the future. It can only get 5 percent of its allocation from the State Water Project, i.e. water delivered via aqueduct from Northern California.

The MWD, which delivers water to 19 million Californians, is drawing down water from Southern California reservoirs, namely Pyramid Lake, Silverwood Lake and Diamond Valley Lake. Groundwater basins in the San Fernando Valley, Pasadena’s Raymond Basin, the enormous San Gabriel Basin and the Santa Ana River watershed in the Inland Empire are approaching record low levels, water managers say.

And the MWD and its 26 member agencies are pumping more water from the Colorado River via Lake Havasu into its system, a water source LADWP is also

using to serve its customers.

The question is, how long can Southern California water agencies keep that up?

“You are just borrowing from the future,” Svoboda said. “It comes down to next winter. Can we get the snowpack and [reservoirs](#) back up? That system was built to buffer against a long-term drought. But that doesn’t mean it will withstand the longest drought.”

We’re on El Niño watch

California’s relationship with El Niño is a fickle one.

When Patzert predicted what he colorfully called the “Godzilla El Niño” of 1997-98, most meteorologists and coast dwellers hoped he was wrong. They feared floods, mudslides and alterations in fishing patterns.

Now, El Niño — named after the Christ child because it usually shows up in December — is looked upon as the savior for California.

But not every El Niño is a drought buster. Patzert says El Niños come in small, medium, large and jumbo. The small and medium ones don’t produce rainstorms. “I don’t want to be the spoiler but what the data shows me is this El Niño is not building. It is dying,” he said.

Climatologists from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Climate Prediction Center in College Park, Md., released a bulletin earlier this month saying there’s an 80 percent chance of an El Niño-Southern Oscillation in September, October or November, and 82 percent chance from November to January.

However, national climatologists have backed away from predicting a strong El Niño like the one that doubled the area’s average rainfall in 1997-98.

“It is different than what folks were thinking a few months ago. At this point we are only favoring a moderate type of event,” said Michael Halpert, acting director of NOAA’s climate center, in an interview Wednesday.

Halpert said the warmer ocean temperatures seen in March and April, which would trigger the jet stream to deliver more storms to Southern California, are not as warm anymore. “It doesn’t compare to 1997.”

Having a tilt toward an El Niño winter is a lot like a gambler going to Vegas with loaded dice, he said. He's more likely to win at craps, but the house is still strong.

“It might work out. We might have a wet winter. But in the field of climate science, there is no way we know for sure,” Halpert said.

Patzert says six of 10 years in Southern California have been dry years. Most likely that will continue. “I think everybody better toughen up and plan for another year of drought,” he said.

Prepare for the worst

Plan for the worst but hope for the best. It is a maxim meteorologist and water managers have espoused during this prolonged drought.

Adan Ortega is a 30-year veteran on water issues, a member of the board of a grass-roots water-saving group Sustainable Conservation and former member of the State Board of Food and Agriculture. He says California should follow “a no regrets path.”

“We need to do some things that are more serious,” he said.

“The environmental community for example, needs to do to the lawn what we did to the plastic bag,” Ortega said.

Because up to 50 percent of urban water is wasted and most of that is wasted outdoors, removing lawns gives the biggest water-savings bang for the buck, said Celeste Cantu, general manager of the [Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority](#), which serves San Bernardino and Riverside counties.

Changing Southern Californian's reliance on lawns is a major paradigm shift. But it is part of the philosophy Cantu espouses on the drought.

“We prefer to characterize it not as a drought that goes away and comes back to normal, but rather that we live in a semi-arid area and water scarcity is part of how we live,” she said at a recent climate conference in Los Angeles. “Our ultimate goal is for everyone to share in their water ethic.”

