

California's promising wet season may go dry

Season may end with below-average rain.

Mark Grossi, Fresno Bee, 2-3-11

After a promising start, the second half of California's wet season may turn into a dry dud, say experts who now predict rainfall totals may even end up below average.

Meteorologists are left struggling to explain the chaotic winter, which went from relentless storms in December to a dry January. Perhaps just as puzzling: Is California really still in a drought?

The Governor's Office still has not lifted a drought designation that former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger declared nearly three years ago. When the reservoirs were filling and the snowpack was growing in December, some argued that the designation had more to do with a water-bond election next year than with meteorology.

And the shifting weather patterns haven't cleared up the issue.

Blame the capricious weather phenomenon La Niña -- a vast blob of cool water along the equator in the Pacific Ocean. It often means dry weather for a huge swath of the state.

But when the ocean cools more than the average for La Niña, as it did this winter, things change. The phenomenon actually helps to create an atmospheric river of tropical moisture flowing into the state. That's what happened in December, and the storms were memorable.

"I've never seen 96 continuous hours of radar readings like I saw in December during one storm," said local meteorologist Steve Johnson. "The Southern Sierra was pounded."

Now, La Niña is weakening, he said. As the ocean warms slightly, a dry-weather pattern emerges for Central and Southern California. Familiar, La Niña-influenced weather is popping up elsewhere, too. Australia and Indonesia are getting hammered by storms.

This week, the Climate Prediction Center in Maryland is saying the storm spigot might slow down to a dribble for California over the next few months.

"The pattern looks like what you would expect for La Niña," said Mike Halpert, deputy director of the Climate Prediction Center. "It favors drier-than-average weather for a few months in California. Because of the big December, at least it won't be a drought year."

So, is the state really in a drought? Nobody in state government is answering that politically delicate question. The Governor's Office declared a statewide drought in June 2008, but meteorologists and many hydrologists say there's no reason for the designation now.

There are other ways of defining a drought -- including a deficit of ground water for years after a drought. If the weather dries out over the next several weeks, the state's drought designation might seem more prudent, some experts say.

But many environmentalists and water activists suspect the designation is being used as a scare tactic to build a case for an \$11 billion water bond -- which they oppose.

Farmers and Southern California cities support the bond. If approved in 2012, it would help rehabilitate the state's water systems, including \$3 billion for reservoir storage.

Officials at the Governor's Office said they remain in contact with the Department of Water Resources about conditions this year, but they won't comment further.

Water resource officials say the drought designation won't affect the operation of the State Water Project, which delivers water to cities and farms. Officials said they will be guided by precipitation, snowmelt runoff and reservoir storage.

"We will forecast based on the hydrology," said spokesman Ted Thomas.

The meteorology already has shifted to a dry pattern. Most of the state had about a third of the rain it usually gets in January, said meteorologist Jan Null. One exception was Fresno, which had about 80% of its usual January rain.

A key Northern California watershed -- supplying water for 25 million people -- had a January total that ranks among its 10 lowest on record, Johnson said. The watershed encompasses the mountains where snowmelt drains into the state's longest river, the Sacramento River.

A massive snowpack from December storms has dwindled, but remains larger than average for this time of year. Major reservoirs are still mostly above average for this time of year.

And even if the weather does dry out, the season probably will wind up being average or just below average, says meteorologist Johnson, who has studied California precipitation for years.

"This scenario has happened before," he said. "The winter of 1946-47 was a La Niña season. It had a big December and dried out thereafter."