

El Niño signals are still iffy for northern reaches of state

Kurtis Alexander, San Francisco Chronicle, 8-7-15

While Southern California remains on track for a wet winter, the forecast for Northern California is still cloudy.

The strengthening El Niño that's expected to bring moisture to at least the southern part of the state is already stirring surprise showers there. Last month, Los Angeles and San Diego set rainfall records.

But it remains to be seen how far north the rain will spread. Only recently did the U.S. Climate Prediction Center say the Bay Area is about a third more likely to be wet than dry come winter, and it has yet to say anything about the state's far northern reaches.

Precipitation in the top half of the state, where many of California's big reservoirs are located, is most important water-wise, especially with supplies diminished after four dry years.

"There is a tendency toward wetter winters during your average El Niño event in the south," explained Stanford University climate researcher Daniel Swain, noting that the correlation with rain makes Southern California conditions easier to forecast than those in the north. "The average El Niño signal is not really meaningful for (all of) California."

The good news, though, is that the El Niño building over the tropical Pacific — a swath of warm water driving moisture into the atmosphere — is shaping up to be one of the strongest seen, and strong El Niños bode well for Northern California rain.

Recently, more and more climate experts seem to be betting on stormy weather farther north.

"While the influence of an average-strength El Niño upon California winter precip is highly variable, the influence of a strong or very strong event, like the one we're most likely headed for, does actually make a wet winter more likely for the entire state," Swain said.

Strong El Niños in the winters of 1982-83 and 1997-98 came with huge amounts of rain across California. San Francisco saw a record 47.2 inches in 1997-98.

Of course, this year's El Niño could fizzle like last winter's. Or, as some have suggested, it may be tempered by a "blob" of higher ocean temperatures in the northern Pacific, which could create a competing force driving dryer weather.

Neither of these prospects, though, seems to be the dominant thinking now.

The U.S. Climate Prediction Center last month gave coastal areas between Eureka and Monterey a 33 to 40 percent chance of having a winter wetter than most years, with the probabilities decreasing the farther north the projection is made. San Francisco stands a 35 or 36 percent chance of a wetter winter.

However, north of Humboldt County along the coast and inland north of Lake Tahoe the odds don't favor wet or dry.

"We just don't have a good climatological signal there," said meteorologist Matthew Rosencrans, with the Climate Prediction Center. "Sometimes during El Niño, they get a lot of rain. Sometimes they don't."

Federal forecasters are scheduled to update their winter forecast in two weeks.