El Niño not fizzling: More storms barreling toward California

Paul Rogers, San Jose Mercury News, 1-14-16

Don't even think about putting that umbrella away.

El Niño conditions may have peaked in the Pacific Ocean, federal scientists said Thursday, but powerful weather systems -- like a new series of storms on track to soak the greater Bay Area over the next five days -- have only just begun and will likely continue at least through May.

"This is the time of year when El Niño acts the most reliably," said Mike Halpert, deputy director of the climate prediction center for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in College Park, Maryland. "So we would certainly expect the impacts to continue well through the rest of the winter and into the early part of the spring."

An umbrella-toting pedestrian heads for the El Cerrito del Norte BART station in El Cerrito, Calif., on Wednesday, Jan. 6, 2016. (Kristopher Skinner/Bay Area News Group) (Kristopher Skinner)

There is a 96 percent chance that El Niño conditions will remain through March, scientists at NOAA and Columbia University reported Thursday, and a 62 percent probability they will continue through May.

Simply put, that means the likelihood of regular storms across California and heavy snow in the Sierra Nevada will continue to be greater this year than in regular years, offering hope that 2016 may finally be the year that the state's four-year drought -- now starting its fifth year -- is broken.

But, experts caution, a lot more rain and snow is needed.

On Thursday, the government's weekly "drought monitor" update showed that 69 percent of California remains in extreme drought, barely changed from three months ago, when it was 71 percent. The scale measures more than 40 indicators, from soil moisture to snowpack to reservoir levels.

"The likelihood of eliminating a drought of this magnitude in one winter is possible, but historically speaking we don't see it that often," said Brian Fuchs, climatologist with the National Drought Mitigation Center in Lincoln, Nebraska.

"We're seeing a lot of things lining up in terms of seeing a substantial easing of the drought, but until it happens, don't count all your eggs until they are in the basket," he said. "We've got to be cautious."

On Thursday, the Sierra snowpack, the source of a third of California's water supply, was at 104 percent of the historic average. But scientists at the state Department of Water Resources say that the snowpack needs to be at about 150 percent by April 1 to end the drought. Rain totals in Northern California also need to be at about 150 percent by April, they say.

On Thursday, rainfall was at 89 percent of the historic average for this date in San Francisco, 70 percent in Oakland, 102 percent in San Jose, 145 percent in Fresno and 69 percent in Los Angeles.

But the trend is in the right direction. A series of four storms starting Friday night and forecast to continue through early Wednesday morning could bring as much as three feet of new snow to the Lake Tahoe area, the National Weather Service said Thursday.

In the Bay Area, those storms are expected to deliver between 1 and 2.5 inches of rain to most Bay Area cities by early Wednesday morning, with the Santa Cruz Mountains and Big Sur areas potentially receiving up to 5 inches.

"This is a typical El Niño weather pattern," said Steve Anderson, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Monterey. "We're looking at storms about every 24 hours."

Although Friday will be mostly dry, Anderson said, rain will be fairly steady for four days beginning Friday night, with the heaviest storms Sunday and Monday, until another break on Wednesday. Some longer-range forecasts show even more rain the following week.

After four years of rough sledding at Sierra ski resorts, the thrill is back.

"This year and last year are a tale of two different winters," said Kevin Cooper, a spokesman for Heavenly and Kirkwood ski areas. "It's just been amazing, a great start to the year. We're seeing happy faces skiing out on the mountain."

Last year at this time, there had been 56 inches of snow at Heavenly, he said. This year, that figure is 193 inches. The historic average for this time of year is 74.

The latest storms are coming from the mid-latitudes of the Pacific Ocean in classic, one-after-another El Niño fashion, rather than the occasional colder storms from the Gulf of Alaska that normally characterize California winters. That makes them very similar to storms that drenched the Bay Area from Jan. 3 to Jan. 7, bringing up to 3 inches of rain in most Bay Area cities and 5 or more inches in coastal mountain communities.

El Niño is a warming of the ocean along the equator off Peru that affects the weather worldwide. The warmer the water, the stronger the impact. Strong El Niños have historically been associated with wetter-than-normal winters in California. In December, the water temperature reached 4.3 degrees Fahrenheit above the historic average, breaking the previous record of 4 degrees from December 1997, a winter that ended up with double the normal rainfall in California -- among the wettest ever recorded.

One of the biggest challenges: water storage after four very dry years.

California's largest reservoirs have slowly begun to fill, but remain low. In the last five weeks, Shasta Lake has added 218,000 acre-feet of water, enough for 1.1 million people for a year. But the reservoir was so low it has only risen to 34 percent full. Historically, it's averaged 66 percent full on this date.