

El Niño not sole answer for California water woes

William V Theobald, The Desert Sun, 3-9-16

WASHINGTON — If Westerners think the current El Niño is the answer to all their water and drought woes, think again, government scientists said Wednesday.

Yes, the experts from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said, the onset of a powerful El Niño like the current one is often associated with more precipitation. And that is what is needed to bring the West out of its 4-year-long drought.

But the picture is more complicated, they said, offering the latest insights from their research.

Martin Hoerling, a meteorologist with NOAA, said research does show that high amounts of precipitation in California have been associated with El Niño events. But there are also instances when below average rainfall occurred in the state during an El Niño. “While it shifts the odds, it doesn’t guarantee the outcome,” Hoerling said.

Surface water supplies in the state and the rest of the West have been improved by a recent increase in rainfall, he said, but this will not solve the lack of groundwater caused by the emptying of aquifers.

El Niño is characterized by unusually warm ocean temperatures in the Equatorial Pacific, which impacts weather patterns across the globe.

NOAA oceanographer William Sweet said researchers are also finding that El Niños are associated with the recent large increase in nuisance tidal flooding along the West and East coasts.

These are minor but serious floods that close off roads and damage property but don’t appear to be tied to any local weather event.

In the short term, heavy rain is expected to drench the Pacific Coast into the weekend, according to the National Weather Service. Totals could be as much as 9 inches in western Washington, 7 inches in northwestern California, 8 inches in the northern Sierra Nevada, 5 inches near San Francisco, and 1-2 inches near San Diego and Los Angeles. The Coachella Valley will see much less.

Lower amounts of precipitation will extend eastward into the Intermountain West and northern Rocky Mountains. Little or no precipitation is forecast for the Southwest.

Drought conditions persist across a large portion of the West, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor, with the most severe in central California stretching into Nevada and Oregon.

Precipitation remains near-to-above normal in Washington, Oregon, northern Nevada, and California’s Sierra Nevada. But Central California — after decent December and January totals — had a disappointing February.

This El Niño is expected to last into early spring or summer, with NOAA scheduled to provide an update on Thursday. Originally predicted to be the most intense El Niño recorded, officials said Wednesday it was not as severe as expected but would still rank near the top. Also, coming up on March 17, NOAA scientists will discuss their spring weather forecast for the nation.