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Surf crashes through the pilings of the Oceanside Municipal Pier in 2004. Another El Nino, a periodic weather condition that brings wetter and sometimes harsher winters, may be brewing, scientists say. (NCT file photo)

REGION: El Nino could signal drought's end

By DAVE DOWNEY - ddowney@nctimes.com

Just as residents of San Diego and Riverside counties start adjusting to life with lawn-watering restrictions, there are signs California's drought may be coming to an end next winter.

Climate scientists say conditions are ripe for the formation of an El Nino over the Pacific Ocean, an intermittent weather condition that brings wet winters to the southern United States.

And that means there is a good chance Southern California will get above-normal rainfall next year.

It also means Mother Nature may dump huge amounts of snow on the Sierra Nevada mountains, the source of much of the region's water, though that is less certain, scientists say.

"There are no guarantees, but we're unlikely to have another dry winter," said Dave Pierce, climate researcher at UC San Diego's Scripps Institution of Oceanography, in a recent telephone interview.

Even if a flurry of storms were to deepen the snow drifts in the Sierra, there are no guarantees that watering rules would be lifted for summer 2010, local water officials said. That's because court-ordered restrictions on water deliveries from Northern California, which made this year's mild drought worse than it otherwise would have been, are expected to stay in place.

Still, there is reason to look forward to the weather phenomenon that tends to return every five years or so.

"It generally means significant drought relief for Southern California when you have an El Nino," said Doug LeComte, a drought expert with the National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center in Camp Springs, Md.

"It greatly increases the odds for heavy rains in the southern part of the state next winter," he said.

Careful what you wish for

The emerging conditions in the central Pacific also could trigger a thickening of the Sierra snowpack in the northern part of the state, after three consecutive winters of below-normal snowfall.

But LeComte said the impact on snow amounts will depend on how large the El Nino becomes.

If it gets to be a monster like the one in 1997-98 that dumped more than 30 inches of rain on parts of Southern California, it would spread higher-than-normal precipitation all around the state, refilling parched reservoirs, LeComte said. Area residents receive a large chunk of their water from the Sierra.

A moderate El Nino, on the other hand, might only increase precipitation in Southern California without doing anything for points north.

Of course, the fledgling El Nino could do more than replenish reservoirs.

"Be careful what you wish for: You could get lots of flooding from El Nino, too," LeComte said.

Indeed, some of the region's worst floods occurred during storms spun off from El Ninos. An example was the massive January 1993 flood that left Old Town Temecula under 4 feet of water and mud.

El Nino is essentially a heating-up of ocean water along the equator, off the west coast of South America. It gets its name from the Spanish reference for the Christ child, because it tends to peak around Christmas.

But the condition begins building long before then.

And the equatorial waters have been warming for the past five months, said Michelle L'Heureux, a meteorologist at the national climate center.

At the start of the year, our weather was controlled by a La Nina condition that is marked by cooler-than-normal ocean water and gives us dry weather. By early June, the water along the equator had warmed by a half-degree Celsius ---- 1 degree Fahrenheit ---- above normal.

If the water continues to warm, and if prevailing easterly winds along the equator weaken in response, L'Heureux said, later this summer the climate center will declare that an El Nino has arrived.

The ocean's temperature is important because the central Pacific is the engine for the North American jet stream. The jet is a narrow column of air six miles above the earth where winds blow extremely hard and funnel storms into areas along its path.

Strong El Ninos tend to pump moisture into the jet stream and steer it south of its normal track, across the southern tier of the United States.

That tends to funnel storms right through Southern California.

Even a normal winter is welcome

But while it is easy to get excited about more rainfall in a drought, Bill Patzert, a climate scientist at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, cautioned against expecting too much.

"This is a long shot," Patzert said. "If we compare it to the El Nino of '97-'98, this one is pretty puny. We're definitely hungry for a wet winter. But at this point it looks like El Wimpo."

To be sure, the emerging El Nino has the look of a moderate one, said Pierce, of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

"But it's better than a La Nina," Pierce said. "At this point, I think we'd be OK with a normal winter."

John Liarakos, a spokesman for the San Diego County Water Authority, which distributes the bulk of water

that San Diego County's 3 million residents use, said any boost in rainfall would be welcome.

But don't expect watering restrictions to disappear anytime soon.

"The restrictions are going to be in place for at least the next year, regardless," he said.

The problem, said Peter Odencrans, spokesman for Riverside County's Eastern Municipal Water District, is that rain can help only so much. That's because much of the reduction in water deliveries from Northern California was the result of environmentally based, court-ordered restrictions on pumping from the Sacramento-San Joaquin delta.

"We do not have just a weather drought, but a regulatory drought as well," Odencrans said.

And the regulatory drought is forecast to continue.

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