

El Niño likely to be too weak to have big impact on drought

 sfgate.com/bayarea/article/El-Ni-o-likely-to-be-too-weak-to-have-big-impact-5532447.php

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Updated 6:51 pm, Thursday, June 5, 2014

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The odds of an El Niño helping shake California out of its prolonged drought got a bit bleaker this week with a new forecast from the U.S. Climate Prediction Center.

Though the agency's monthly report still projects that summer or fall will give rise to an El Niño - the warming ocean surfaces that can tip worldwide weather - federal scientists say the phenomenon is most likely to be only of moderate strength.

In Northern California, El Niños that have been weak or moderate have had little correlation with winter weather conditions, while strong ones have been associated with some of the region's wettest years. The El Niño year of 1997-98, for example, pounded San Francisco with a record 47.2 inches of rain.

"We continue to be confident that an El Niño will develop," said Mike Halpert, acting director of the Climate Prediction Center. But he added, "Maybe it's not looking like the '97-'98 event that a few folks thought a few months ago."

A giant underwater swell known as a Kelvin wave has pushed cold Pacific Ocean waters closer to the sea floor this year, creating the warmer sea surfaces that can define an El Niño. Thursday's forecast raised the chances of El Niño's arrival in the Northern Hemisphere this summer to 70 percent - and 80 percent by fall or winter.

However, Halpert said another Kelvin wave is probably needed for a stronger El Niño to emerge.

"There's a slight tilt toward a moderate-strength event, though we really aren't ruling anything out at this point," he said.

While moderate El Niños have meant little to Northern California, they have been associated with wetter winters in the southern part of the state. The strong ones have been linked to wetter weather statewide.

Federal scientists warn, though, that El Niños - weak or strong - come with a lot of variability and are by no means a surefire indicator of what the winter will bring.

Most places in California have seen just half their average precipitation this rain year, and that follows two drier-than-normal years.

Water deliveries from the state and federal water projects have been cut, and the governor is asking all Californians to reduce their water use by 20 percent. Some communities have gone as far as invoking

mandatory rationing.