

No end to Southland drought seen in winter rain forecast

By Matt
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Southern California could see above-average rainfall this winter, but it won't be enough to shake the drought that is likely to persist or intensify in large swaths of the state, federal forecasters said Thursday.

"The drought has been so severe and so long-lasting that it's going to take more than one year to get you back to normal," said Mike Halpert, acting director of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Climate Prediction Center.

Scientists at the center said that there is about a 67% chance that an El Niño — a warming of the Pacific Ocean that, combined with shifts in the atmosphere, sometimes produces more rain — will develop by year's end. But even if an El Niño does develop, it probably wouldn't be strong enough to generate enough rainfall — more than 20 inches, some experts say — to relieve the region.

Although NOAA forecasters predicted a slightly wetter year for the Southland, the outlook remained dry for Central California, one of the state's most parched regions. Most of the middle of the state would continue in what the NOAA classified as "exceptional drought."

Compounding the drought, Californians can also expect above-average temperatures from November through January, particularly along the coast, the NOAA forecasters said. Santa Ana winds, common during winter, can sometimes drive temperatures into the 90s as late as February, said Stuart Seto of the National Weather Service.

Local weather officials were not as optimistic as the national forecasters. Experts at the NWS forecast office in Oxnard said that even above-normal rainfall would probably mean only an extra few inches.

William Patzert, a climatologist for the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in La Cañada Flintridge, doubted the accuracy of the NOAA forecast. He said he believes conditions will stay mostly dry. An El Niño, he said, is unlikely to occur, and even a weak one wouldn't necessarily bring rain. Some of the region's driest winters in the last decade, he said, have included a weak El Niño.

"This [NOAA] forecast banks on an El Niño that would influence precipitation patterns," he said. "They're saying the odds are two in three. I'd say that's extremely optimistic to delusional."

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