

California's holiday gift: forecasts of a wet winter

By Kurtis Alexander

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Photo: Justin Sullivan, Getty Images

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MILL VALLEY, CA - DECEMBER 03: A cyclist rides through a flooded section of roadway on December 3, 2014 in Mill Valley, California. The San Francisco Bay Area is being hit with its first major storm of the year that is bringing heavy rain, lightning and hail to the region. The heavy overnight rain has caused flooding which has blocked several roadways and caused severe traffic backups. (Photo by Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

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MILL VALLEY, CA - DECEMBER 03: Cars sit in miles-long traffic jam on southbound highway 101 as they approach a flooded section of the freeway on December 3, 2014 in Mill Valley, California. The San Francisco Bay Area is being hit with its first major storm of the year that is bringing heavy rain, lightning and hail to the region. The heavy overnight

rain has caused flooding which has blocked several roadways and caused severe traffic backups. (Photo by Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

The storms that socked the Bay Area this week might just be the start of something beautiful — a wet winter.

Meteorologists say periodic showers are likely through the middle of December, while new federal climate models, including a bumped-up forecast for El Niño, hint at definitively soggier months ahead.

While much of California still needs at least 50 percent more rain and snow than average this winter to make up for three dry years, climate experts are optimistic that the state won't fall deeper into drought — and could very well close some of its rainfall deficit by summer.

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“Right now, things look pretty good,” said [Mike Halpert](#), acting director of the [U.S. Climate Prediction Center](#) in Maryland. “The forecasts favor wet. How wet that is, who knows.”

Weather prediction is a fickle science, and increasingly rosy indicators could ultimately fall flat.

[Eric Kipp](#), manager of [California Ski Co.](#) in Berkeley, hopes that's not the case. Recent snow in the Sierra has been good for traffic at the shop, which specializes in custom boot-fitting.

The store has been forced to explore new revenue streams as Tahoe's ski season has withered amid the drought.

“It feels sort of like business as usual now,” Kipp said Friday.

Federal scientists don't see signs of dry weather returning in force anytime soon. There's little suggestion, for example, of a stagnant high-pressure system developing over the Pacific Ocean, like the one that emerged last year and steered storms away from California.

Instead, typical west-to-east weather patterns have prevailed, allowing systems like Wednesday's gully washer to smack the state.

San Francisco received nearly 2 inches of rain over a 24-hour period, while parts of Marin County, the Russian River and the Santa Cruz Mountains got more than 5 inches, according to the [National Weather Service](#).

Above-average rain

The storm, which followed several days of showers, pushed most of the Bay Area above average rainfall levels for the first time since the start of the rain year July 1.

Climate models also show ocean conditions favoring — slightly — more rain, Halpert said.

A short-lived pattern known as the Madden-Julian oscillation, which triggers clouds and rain near the equator, has been active, he said. Additionally, the Climate Prediction Center on Thursday increased the chances of an El Niño emerging this winter to 65 percent — from 58 percent in November.

The El Niño, a warming of tropical Pacific surface waters that can prompt moist weather around the globe, is not expected to be strong — the type that correlates with heavy rainfall in California. But it could mean greater precipitation in the southern and central parts of the state, Halpert said.



Most important for the state water supply is what falls in the Sierra. The drought has left mountain reservoirs, which provide the bulk of water to California's urban areas and its giant agricultural industry, critically low, forcing cities and farms to cut back, sometimes drastically.

This week's storms gave reservoirs a needed boost. The state's largest, Lake Shasta, grew 2 percent in volume while Lake Oroville, the second largest, grew 5 percent, according to the [California Department of Water Resources](#).

The reservoirs, though, still contain much less water than normal for this time of year — averaging statewide about 56 percent of the capacity typical of the date.

San Francisco's water supply, most of which comes from Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, is 56.4 percent full, compared with the 80 percent it averages at this point. City water managers, as in other places, have asked residents to reduce their water consumption by at least 10 percent.

State and local water managers are reluctant to say how much precipitation they'll need this winter to fill reservoirs. The levels depend on myriad factors, such as when the precipitation comes, whether it arrives as rain or snow and how evenly it's spread — not to mention how quickly the reservoirs are drawn.

But it will take more than the usual four or five big storms to bring reservoirs to average levels — as much as 150 percent of normal precipitation is needed, many speculate.

Still early

"It's too early in the season (to know)," said Sudhakar Talanki, a branch chief of hydrology for the Department of Water Resources, "but what we have received is welcomed."

The near-term weather forecast calls for lingering showers Saturday morning.

Sunday will be dry, said hydrologist and forecaster [Mark Strudley](#) with the National Weather Service, but another bout of rain is likely Monday, with an even wetter system on track for Thursday.

"It's definitely a change from what we've seen the past two or three years," Strudley said. "It's a nice wet start to the water year, that's for sure."

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