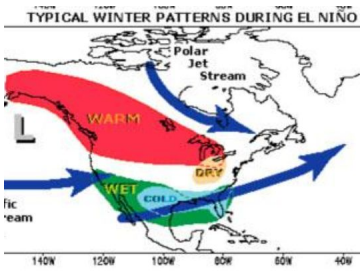
Chances of wet winter look good for central state

Dennis Taylor 1:23 p.m. PDT July 14, 2015

(Photo: Provided/NOAA)



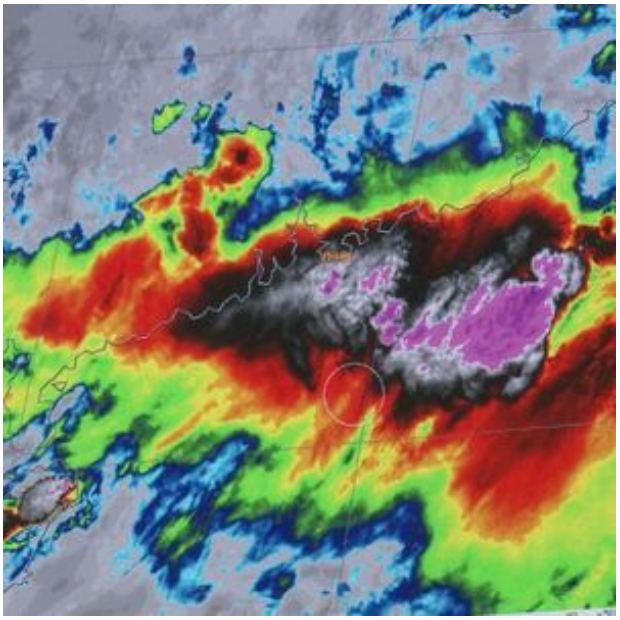
There's a strong chance that beginning in the fall, a strong El Nino system will be an engine for storms that could make this a very wet winter along the West Coast, according to the National Weather Service.

NWS officials stop short at predicting heavy rains because there are too many variables that could affect where the storms come ashore, said meteorologists in Hanford. Historically El Nino patterns bring more rain to Southern California than either the Central Coast or the San Joaquin Valley, the meteorologists said.

"Central California is right on the cusp," said Kevin Durfee, a meteorologist at the Hanford NWS office. "It could go either way, but there's a good chance of a very wet winter. We'll stand a good chance of having a wetter winter than the past two years."

VISALIA TIMES-DELTA AND TULARE ADVANCE-REGISTER

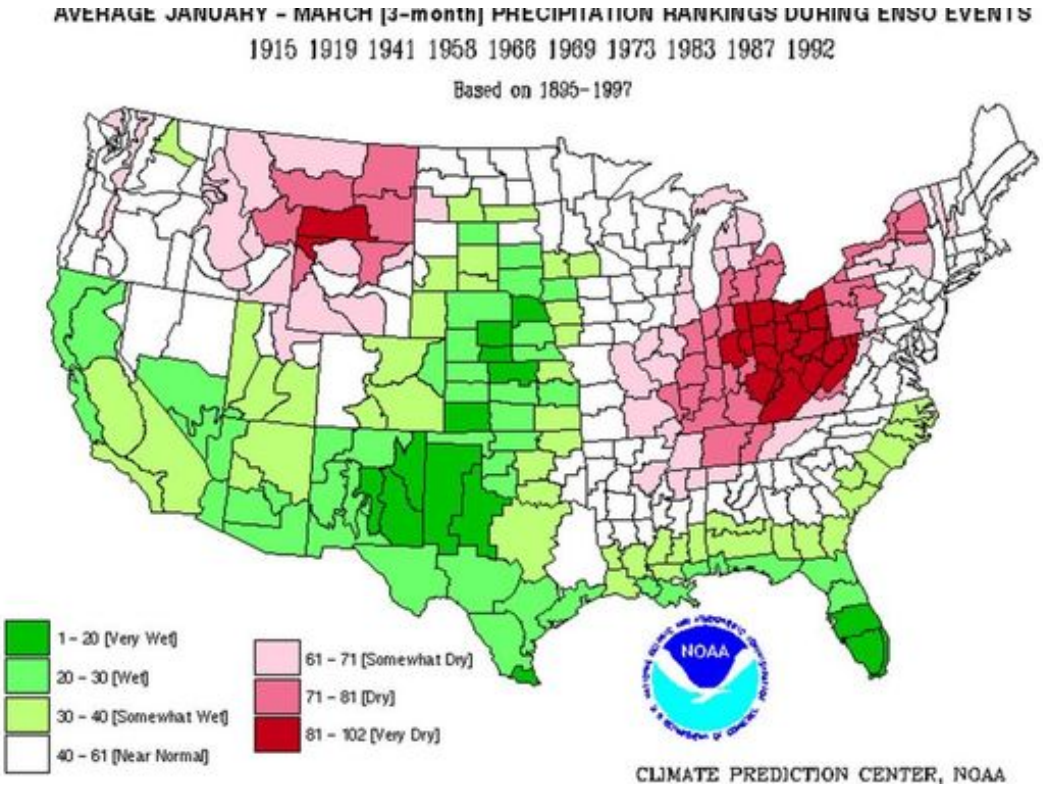
Massive El Niño growing, say models



Even if Central California receives torrents, it won't erase the damage done from the past four years of drought. It will certainly help, but one wet season won't be a drought-buster.

El Nino is defined as above normal sea surface temperatures in the equatorial region of the Pacific Ocean. Since heat is energy, the storm-producing engines in the Pacific, called cyclogenesis, are revving higher than in a La Nina pattern. Whether Central California gets torrential rain or just a good soaking depends on where in the Pacific those engines set up shop.

"The correlation (between El Nino and heavy rainfall) is better for the southern part of the state," said Charles Bell, a meteorologist at the NWS Monterey office. "We are in a transition zone up here."



On this National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration map, the Central California stands a good chance of a wet to very wet winter. (Photo: Provided/NOAA)

But if you wager, place a bet on Central California have a wet fall, winter and into spring 2016. Here's why: In the winter of 1982-83 an El Nino pattern set up that had the same strength as the current pattern and it turned out to be the wettest winter on record, Durfee said. And then again in 1997-98 an El Nino of similar strength formed and brough torrents to Northern and Central California.

There is a downside for communities depending on snow pack in the Sierra Nevada. El Nino patterns spawn warm "atmospheric rivers" which are born out in the area of the Hawaiian Islands, thus their nickname "pineapple express." Durfee noted that in past El Nino storm systems the atmospheric rivers brought in strong but warm rains, even at elevations of 9,000 instead of snow. Cold storm systems tend to form over Alaska and with them many feet of snow pack.

A wet winter will also help reservoirs. Robert Johnson, assistant general manager of the Monterey County Water Resources Agency, said all its flood control measures are updated, but ultimately reservoir fill is at the hands of Mother Nature. A dramatic example is the Salinas Valley flood of 1995.

"In January of '95 Lake Nacimiento was at minimum pool," Johnson said. "By March it was spilling over."

The chances of El Nino remaining strong through the winter are high. The NWS gives a greater than 90 percent chance that El Nino conditions will continue through fall, and about an 85 percent chance it will last through the winter. In addition, climate forecasters suggest there is about an 80 percent chance of the El Nino sticking around into spring 2016.

The reason weather officials can't predict with certainty of the likelihood of precipitation in Central California is because their data only goes back to the 1950s.

"That's a short window in the world of meteorology," Bell said.