

An El Niño Winter

California will likely be wet, Texas could be cool and wet, but the Midwest should be warmer and a bit drier than average.

by Kindra Gordon

El Niño is back in the forecast for the 2010 winter season and, as a result, will influence the weather through February and possibly into the spring in the U.S., according to the 2009 Winter Outlook released by the National Climate Prediction Center (CPC).

“We expect El Niño to strengthen and persist through the winter months, providing clues as to what the weather will be like during the period,” says Mike Halpert, deputy director of the CPC — a division of the National Weather Service.

He explains that an El Niño means “warmer ocean water in the equatorial Pacific shifts the patterns of tropical rainfall and in turn changes the strength and position of the jetstream and storms over the Pacific Ocean and the U.S.”

Here’s what certain portions of the country can expect if this El Niño pattern persists:

- **Warmer-than-average temperatures** across much of the western and central U.S., especially in the north-central states from Montana to Wisconsin. Though temperatures may average warmer than usual, periodic outbreaks of cold air are still possible, states the CPC.

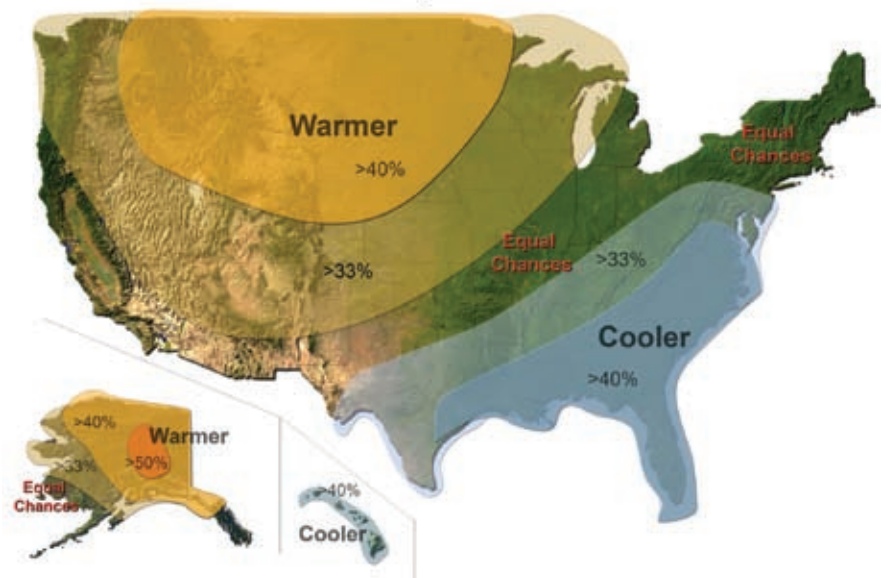
- **Below-average temperatures** are expected across the Southeast and mid-Atlantic from southern and eastern Texas to southern Pennsylvania and south through Florida.

- **Above-average precipitation** is expected in the southern border states, especially Texas and Florida. This is good news for Texas, where more rainfall would improve current drought conditions in central and southern Texas, according to CPC’s Halpert. However, tornado records suggest that there may also be an increased chance of organized tornado activity for the Gulf Coast region this winter.

- **Drier-than-average** conditions are expected in the Pacific Northwest and the Ohio and Tennessee River Valleys. Again, this is good news for the Ohio region, which has had a soggy harvest season.

- **Equal chances for above-, near-, or below-normal temperatures and precipitation** in the Northeast. Winter weather in this region is often driven not by El Niño but by weather patterns over the northern Atlantic Ocean and

U.S. Winter Outlook Temperature



Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)

Arctic, such as the North Atlantic Oscillation. These patterns are often more short-term and are generally predictable only a week or so in advance.

- **A slight tilt in the odds toward wetter-than-average conditions** over the entire state of California.

Iowa State University Extension Climatologist Elwynn Taylor concurs with the CPC report. Taylor explains that the past two winters have had a La Nina pattern but conditions changed this past summer toward the El Niño pattern, moving into 2010.

Of this Taylor says, “California has already gotten some El Niño weather (which means wet), and some people

are not happy there. But usually El Niño is a friend to Midwest agriculture because everything is closer to normal over winter.”

He adds that a more normal pattern means some areas in the Midwest will have the opportunity to dry out and not be “so sopping wet.”

The CPC emphasizes that its seasonal outlook for winter does not predict where and when snowstorms may hit or total seasonal snowfall accumulations. Halpert explains that snow forecasts are dependent upon winter storms, which are generally not predictable more than several days in advance. **HW**