



2016 Weather: Return to Drier Weather Anticipated

by Kindra Gordon

El Niño conditions throughout 2015 have helped much of the U.S. recover from severe drought. But a Colorado meteorologist with a ranching background is forecasting conditions to change by spring 2016.

Brian Bledsoe, chief meteorologist for KKTU in Colorado Springs, says, “This blessing of moisture we’ve had is not going to last. Ranchers should be very diligent and plan how they will use this moisture in the short term.”

Of the current status in the Western Plains, Bledsoe says,

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— Brian Bledsoe

“We are in pretty good shape considering where we’ve been with drought the last several years.”

He credits this to the strong El Niño in progress — the second strongest since 1950. Bledsoe explains, “The Pacific Ocean is

hot. The ocean waters have been warm for the past year and that has had a huge impact on weather patterns globally.”

He further explains that El Niño does things to the storm track that make weather conditions more active in the southern tier of the U.S. “That’s what we’ve been seeing. Montana and the Dakotas have not been getting the big storms.”

Conversely, when the Pacific waters are in a cold phase, it tends to cause drought in the Western High Plains. “That was what occurred from 2005-2013,” says Bledsoe.

Like the Pacific, the Atlantic Ocean has also been in a warm phase — a phase that began in 1995. But, Bledsoe anticipates that in a few years, the Atlantic will flip to a cool phase.

When there is a cool phase in either ocean, there’s a greater chance for drought in the West. He says weather statistics indicate the Western High Plains face drought 75% of the time.

To this Bledsoe says to producers, “If you don’t have a drought plan, you better get one — yesterday! There’s no ‘might’ about this. If you ‘might,’ you will lose a lot of money.”

He continues, “If you don’t have grass, you don’t have cattle on the place. You can’t feed yourself out of a drought. But, if you have a plan, you can act and not have to sell your whole herd. So, get a drought plan.”

Specific forecast

Bledsoe believes El Niño will peak in December 2015, and then he anticipates it will rapidly diminish in intensity going into spring. He says, “By spring several computer models suggest a neutral or even weak La Niña” — which is a cooling of the waters in the Pacific.

As a result of these changes, Bledsoe says California should be “soggy” from December through February, which he says will be a “good thing” considering the lack of water the state has experienced.

From March through May, Bledsoe says soggy conditions should also be seen across the southern tier of the country. However, in the Northern Plains, “moisture may get shorted.”

But things will change come June through August 2016. Bledsoe says if La Niña is in place, then the northern tier of the country will be OK for moisture. But it will prompt drier

conditions across the southeastern and southwestern states. And he reminds producers “That’s how it [the drought] all started last time.”

Bledsoe parallels the pending spring and summer 2016 forecast to 1997 and 1998. He says, “That was a strong El Niño with plenty of moisture in early spring. Then moisture shut off in May, June and July.”

Bledsoe says for the big picture, his message going forward is this: “The weather times from the ’70s through ’90s — those times are over. Today, the drier times are longer and more frequent so ranchers have to have a drought plan.”

To cow-calf producers who are in the midst of restocking, Bledsoe says, “My advice is to be cautious.”

He continues, “Producers need perspective at these prices. If you overextend yourself now and have a wreck, you’re done. It’s not going to be wet forever, and summer 2016 could be drier in the South.” **HW**

Editor’s note: Bledsoe offers consulting, forecasting and speaking services. Learn more at BrianBledsoeWx.com