

The El Niño Effect

Forecast for spring 2007 includes more moderate temperatures but lingering drought through the Northern Great Plains.

by Kindra Gordon

As a new year begins to unfold, a common concern among cattlemen is what the weather trend will be in the months ahead. Everyone, of course, is hoping the drought conditions will subside.

Producers in Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Arizona just may see that happen, according to Brian Fuchs, climatologist with the National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Fuchs reports that according to the National Drought Monitor 43% of the country was experiencing drought in December, whereas three months earlier 61% of the country was considered under drought conditions. He says, "Much of the improvement in ground moisture has occurred in the Southeast where summer monsoons helped make up the precipitation deficit. That should allow for better spring growing conditions for haying and grazing."

Fuchs attributes the moisture in the Southeast to the current El Niño weather pattern that the country is experiencing — caused by the warming of tropical waters off the Pacific. During an El Niño, temperatures are typically above normal for much of the country with above normal precipitation for the southern tier of states, Fuchs explains.

Elwynn Taylor, an Iowa State University professor of ag meteorology, also credits this El Niño, which began abruptly last July, with slowing tropical storms and hurricanes from developing in the Gulf of Mexico last fall.

Look for more weeds in '07 too

Along with the continued drought, landowners can expect more weeds in the year ahead as well. Eddie Funderburg with the Noble Foundation predicts, "Pasture weeds will probably be bad in 2007."

He explains that with the drought, most pastures had bare ground or very short grass going into winter. That said, weed seeds germinate more readily where there is not a solid canopy of groundcover than they do where there is thick vegetation. Thus, there's the higher chance for weed infestations in the spring of 2007.

He suggests producers scout for weeds this spring and plan to spray herbicides to help with control. **HW**

Little relief in the North

However, not all areas benefit from an El Niño, as it bodes below normal precipitation for the Northern Plains. Fuchs points out that regions of Nebraska, Wyoming and the Dakotas are moving into their eighth or ninth year of continuous drought, and unfortunately, he says, "We don't expect those conditions to change a lot in the short term."

Fuchs anticipates that the warm, dry temperatures created by the El Niño across the Northern Plains will dry out the soils even more in February, March and April causing drought conditions to persist.

Fuchs and Taylor say the El Niño conditions are expected to continue until at least April — or longer. "The surface water temperatures have not peaked in the Pacific yet, which indicates El Niño will strengthen for the next few months," Fuchs explains.

Thus, during the next three to five months, the South should continue to see moisture, and Fuchs predicts New Mexico, Texas and Oklahoma will see the most improvement in drought conditions. He tempers that by saying, "This will be a start, but it is slow coming out of a drought. Multi-year improvement in precipitation is needed to fully recover from drought."

Meanwhile, Wyoming, Montana, Nebraska and the Dakotas will see drought linger, Fuchs anticipates. He says the best hope for improvement in moisture conditions is if some of these areas can catch a spring snowstorm. "Winter storms are one of those things that are unpredictable and can dramatically improve moisture conditions for the season," comments Fuchs.

Taylor adds that there is a chance the El Niño could end as abruptly as it began, which could mean more moisture for the North. But he also says that according to his review of historical weather records of the last 800 years, there is an 18-year cycle of widespread drought in the U.S. Twenty-three years was the longest span between such events. In recent years, Taylor says, "Local drought has occurred, but not what would be considered widespread (particularly in the Corn Belt)." He says 1988 was the most recent documented widespread drought in the U.S., which was 19 years ago. Thus, he anticipates a year of widespread drought is still to come. **HW**

For more weather information, visit:

U.S. Drought Monitor

<http://drought.unl.edu/dm/monitor.html>

Climate Prediction Center Forecasts and Outlook Maps, Graphs and Tables

<http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/forecasts/>