

# El Niño Returns

Drought conditions improve in some areas.

by Riley Greiten

**W**elcome moisture across much of the United States since last winter finally began pushing aside the widespread, multi-year drought for some producers. By June, 41% of the nation's cattle were in areas impacted by drought, compared to 50% a year earlier.

"We've turned the corner, we're getting some moisture, people have a reason to be optimistic, but it takes a long time to turn the ship," Dale Blasi, Kansas State University beef cattle nutrition and management specialist, explained toward the end of June. Western Kansas endured drought as long as anyone in the nation, but the Sunflower state finally received much-needed moisture. At the same time, neighboring Missouri illustrated deepening drought experienced by others.

However, drought conditions in many of the hardest-hit portions of cow country should improve with the recent arrival of El Niño.

"El Niño has returned for the first time since 2018-2019. However, the warm ocean waters have not yet begun to strongly exert an influence on the atmosphere above," explained Brad Rippey, USDA meteorologist in June. "Such a connection will likely not occur for a few more months, until late summer or autumn. Until then, we're at the mercy of other atmospheric whims, such as the blocking high-pressure system that parked itself over the central U.S.,

leading to record-shattering heat in Texas and drought in the Midwest."

## El Niño 101

El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is a periodic and recurring climate pattern involving changes in sea surface temperatures in the central and eastern tropical Pacific Ocean. In June, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) scientists expected at least a 56% chance of the current El Niño becoming a strong event; 84% chance of at least a moderate event.

Typically, El Niño brings above average moisture to the southern and southeastern portions of the United States. The opposite is expected during periods of La Niña conditions. The most recent La Niña impacting the U.S. ended in March.

"In general, El Niño-related temperature and precipitation impacts across the United States occur during the cold half of the year (October through March)," according to *United States El Niño Impacts* from the NOAA. "The most reliable of these signals (the one that has been observed most frequently) is wetter-than-average conditions along the Gulf Coast from Texas to Florida during this 6-month period. This relationship has occurred during more than 80% of the El Niño events in the past 100 years."

Strong El Niños can also increase moisture in the Southwest and California.

"Eventually, atmospheric disruptions associated with El Niño will begin to take over U.S. weather patterns. When that happens — almost certainly later this year — there will be an increasing likelihood of ENSO-related precipitation enhancement across the southern tier of the U.S., including the southern Great Plains," Rippey said.

Conversely, El Niño typically brings more dryness and warmer winters to other parts of the U.S.

"Later in the year, when El Niño rules the roost, there are indications that drought will be a concern in parts of the northern U.S.," Rippey explained. "Current precipitation forecasts from the National Weather Service suggest that autumn 2023 drought concerns will be greatest in the Northwest, with dryness possibly expanding eastward into the Great Lakes region by late winter and early spring of 2024."

In the meantime, NOAA's Climate Prediction Center forecasts widespread temperature increases for the majority of the nation throughout the summer.

## Herd expansion chances

When major beef cow states heal from drought, national herd expansion will have a chance to begin. Those states include the five with the most beef cows: Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Nebraska and Kansas.

There were 28.9 million beef cows in the United States when this year began, according to the USDA *Cattle* report. That was fewer than the same time a year earlier, representing the smallest U.S. beef cow herd in decades. Much of the ongoing herd liquidation is driven by drought.

NOAA's Climate Prediction Center forecasts improving moisture conditions with drought lessening in parts of the U.S. — ending in parts of the High Plains — as the nation moves toward the cold season.

"I would say over the last month we have seen a reduction in the severity of drought," Blasi said of Kansas. "I just spoke with a producer this morning, and he said their grass conditions were good and they had some rain in their ponds. I spoke with this same producer six weeks ago, and he was selling females."

Blasi explained prolonged drought meant producers were paying record high prices for hay — about \$180 per ton for round bales of prairie hay and as much as \$300 per ton in western Kansas for grinding alfalfa.

"I would expect that as El Niño-related precipitation patterns become fully established during the 2023-24 cold season, percentages of both hay and cattle in drought should decrease nationally on the strength of significant precipitation in key production areas, such as the southern Great Plains," Rippey said. **BA**