

Reno winter forecast: Warmer, drier than normal, federal government predicts

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Hopes for a wet winter to help Northern Nevada and the Sierra recover from drought conditions dimmed Thursday after a long-term forecast by federal experts cited the likelihood of warm and dry months ahead.

Drier-than-normal conditions are expected across most of Nevada and in Northern California, the U.S. Climate Prediction Center forecast in its winter outlook for 2012-13.

“At this point that part of the country does have a tilt toward drier and warmer than average,” said Mike Halpert, the climate center’s deputy director. (Models) point us in the direction of it most likely being a drier and milder winter, sort of like last year, but most likely not as extreme as what last year turned out to be.”

A drier forecast comes after an El Niño weather phenomenon — expected to have developed by now — is wavering in intensity and shows signs of going away, Halpert said. An El Niño is characterized by warm ocean surface temperatures in the east Pacific and has brought heavy winters to the Reno-Tahoe area in the past.

“We haven’t completely written it off. We’re certainly not as bullish on El Niño developing as we were,” Halpert said. “This is really contributing to a very challenging forecast.”

Thursday’s winter outlook was released a day after climate experts convened at the Desert Research Institute to discuss the past drought year and prospects for the winter ahead. The CPC’s outlook validates many of the dry expectations voiced then, said Kelly Redmond of DRI’s Western Regional Climate Center.

Many people, including frustrated skiers, drought-stricken ranchers and firefighters who weathered an epic fire season, had hoped for a heavy winter to layer the mountains in snow, boost water supplies and moisten kiln-dry vegetation.

That’s still not out of the question but looks increasingly unlikely.

“It’s changed quite a bit, and it’s toward the dry side,” Redmond said. “It’s showing dry conditions basically from border to border, especially along the West Coast. It’s impressively dry.”

The outlook employs numerical computer models. Looking at the months of December, January and February — the heart of the snow season — six of seven models indicate a dry winter across much of the West over that period, Redmond said.

A drier-than-normal winter is also forecast for the Pacific Northwest, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and northern Missouri. Much of the southeast should be wetter than normal.

Another dry winter could be particularly problematic here because the excess water from the big winter of 2010-11 — supplies that carried the region through the last dry winter and the blistering summer that followed — is gone.

“We were able to coast quite a long ways off of the winter before, but that buffer is pretty well used up,” Redmond said.

The Reno area is equipped with drought reserves to weather a longer drought but the situation could prove

serious in places such as the Carson and Walker river basins, which have far less reservoir storage.

After a dangerous fire year for Nevada — including two destructive winter season blazes in the Reno area that destroyed nearly 30 homes each — another dry winter is of significant concern, said Gina McGuire, a fire meteorologist with the Western Great Basin Coordinating Center.

“We’re looking at a better chance for a dry winter and for fires, a dry winter is never good news,” McGuire said.