

**Headline: More dry times in forecast; If La Nina forms in Pacific, rain will be scarce in winter**

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Following its driest weather season in history, Southern California can expect to get less than two-thirds of its normal rainfall - or less than 10 inches - this winter, forecasters say.

That means more concerns for firefighters facing already critically dry brush as well as Southland cities considering water rationing.

"Right now, we have a developing La Nina - the demon diva of drought," said Bill Patzert, a research oceanographer at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in La Canada Flintridge, who predicted less than 10 inches, down from the normal 15 inches in Los Angeles.

"If it's a dry winter, that means a higher frequency of Santa Anas. In terms of a fire season ... it's a potential monster coming out of the High Desert."

This month, the NOAA Climate Prediction Center reported that surface ocean temperatures from Peru to the Philippines had cooled 1 degree this summer, signaling a La Nina.

The 8,000-mile current can push the storm-bearing jet stream north, dumping buckets of precipitation on the Pacific Northwest.

But it can also rob the Southwest - now in its eighth year of drought - of rain needed to refill aquifers, rebuild the snowpack and replenish dangerously dry brush after last year's 3.2 inches of rain and 78 days of howling Santa Anas.

"A typical La Nina pattern means drier, and warmer, weather than normal for Southern California," said Ken Clark, senior meteorologist for Accuweather.com. "We could be looking at 10 percent less rain than normal - or 60 percent less rain."

With thousands of firefighters battling two blazes near Big Bear Lake in San Bernardino County and Julian in San Diego County before the onset of the Santa Anas this month, less rain could mean an especially long fire season.

"I'm still worried about this fall when the Santa Anas kick off," said Los Angeles County fire Chief John Todd, head of the Forestry Division. "A lack of rain in the future will make it an even more difficult situation."

"It may mean more work for us firefighters."

With Long Beach beginning mandatory water restrictions and other cities expected to follow suit, many water agencies fear the worst.

Water imports from Northern California are expected to be cut by one-third because of a court order to protect the delta smelt.

The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California warned this month of mandatory rationing for the first time since 1991.

Los Angeles, which normally gets half its water from the eastern Sierra, has had to buy 70 percent of its water from the MWD at a cost of \$100 million.

This spring, city officials called on residents to cut water use 10 percent by taking shorter showers, using less water on the lawn and by sweeping, not hosing off, the driveway.

In addition, the DWP is conserving through greater use of reclaimed water, storm-water capture and "green" buildings designed to save water.

Because of increasing conservation, the Department of Water and Power reports that water demands have been steady for 25 years - despite a million new residents.

"At this moment, we clearly have adequate storage, and there's no present need to move toward more drastic measures such as rationing," said David Nahai, president of the DWP commission.

"But we must be watchful that that isn't necessary. ... The amount of (potable) water that goes on lawns, parks, golf courses and freeway medians is a criminal waste for us, and we have to rethink it."

Today, the city is expected to sign an agreement with the county to triple the holding capacity of Big Tujunga Dam to 6,000 acre-feet to capture more storm water.

In Sacramento, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has called for a special session to discuss water issues and health care.

Across the state, officials say, 70 percent of water is used for crops, with the remainder used by residents. At home, about 70 percent of water goes on lawns and shrubs.

For that reason, many see many more turns at the spigot to effect conservation.

"If we stopped watering the streets, sidewalks and driveways, we wouldn't have to ration water," Patzert said.

For the Southern California weather guru, the only conflict about forecasting the rains lies between his Sierra Madre oak tree and his La Nina science charts.

This year's heavy blanket of acorns, according to Indian folklore, means a heavy rain winter, which was the accurate forecast in 1997-98 and 2004-05.

La Nina, however, portends another dry season.

"At night, it sounds like a machine gun of acorns on my redwood deck," Patzert said. "The folklore tells us greater than 20 inches, but the facts suggest less than 10." #

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