



John O'Connell/Capital Press
Snow-capped mountains are visible from Bonneville Ridge in Inkom, Idaho. Idaho's snowpack is relatively strong, following a wet December, but the weather has been drier to start January.

Idaho weather switches from wet to dry

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

Following a wet December throughout most of Idaho, climate experts say the state's weather patterns have taken a dry turn in January.

December ended with strong snowpacks throughout the Southern Idaho mountains, ranging from 160 to 190 percent of normal. The snowpack is especially deep in the southwestern Bruneau and Owyhee basins, which are coming off of consecutive years of severe drought.

The snowpack was 135 percent of normal in the state's west-central mountains, 125 to 140 percent of normal in the Salmon and Big Wood drainages, slightly below normal in both the Northern Panhandle and Eastern Idaho's Upper Snake River region and just 66 percent of normal in the Bear River drainage near Stewart Dam.

Ron Abramovich, water supply specialist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, explained during the past two winters, a pocket of warm ocean water in the North Pacific forced the jet stream around the Pacific Northwest, causing storms to track along the Continental Divide and blanket the Snake River headwaters in Wyoming by the Idaho border. Late this fall, that pocket turned colder,

opening the door for storms to enter Idaho.

This winter, a strong El Nino pattern — marked by warm Pacific Ocean water near the equator — has forced storms to enter Idaho from the southwest, Abramovich said. He said Idaho also benefited from storms "spinning out of the Northwest."

The weather patterns shifted again to start January, however. Abramovich said the majority of Idaho received just 20 to 30 percent of its normal snowpack through Jan. 8. The notable exception to the recent dry trend has been the Bear River drainage, which received its normal January moisture during the first week of the month, after being missed by December storms.

"The pattern appears to be changing with more of the storms down there now," Abramovich said. "It appears we're in a dry spell for a little bit."

Jan. 15 marks the midpoint of the snow season. Though the extended forecast calls for more dry weather, Abramovich said the weather pattern is active and he's optimistic storms will return.

In the Upper Snake, this winter has been a return to normal following two exceptional winters, when the storm track inundated the system's headwaters, despite largely bypassing Idaho.

Mexico sets tariffs on some apple exporters

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

YAKIMA, Wash. — Mexico has imposed temporary tariffs on U.S. apples based on allegations of apple dumping in 2013, but several industry leaders say the impact probably won't be too bad.

Companies with no tariff, such as Yakima's Washington Fruit & Produce, may ship more of its fruit to Mexico and companies such as his own with high tariffs may ship less, said Mark Zirkle, president of Rainier and Zirkle fruit companies, Selah.

The industry will probably still ship 9 million boxes of apples to Mexico this season which is in the normal range but down from the record 16 million shipped there last year from Washington's largest crop, Zirkle said.

Tom Riggan, general manager of Chelan Fresh Marketing, agreed 9 million boxes remains a reasonable expectation and said most companies are still seeking clarification of what will be paid at the border. Mexico's Ministry of Economia sets the duties but the Ministry of Agriculture determines what's collected at the border, Riggan said.

As of Jan. 10, Washington had shipped 2 million boxes of apples to Mexico so far in this season compared with 3.1 million at the same point a year ago. Fewer Washington Red and Golden Delicious apples and a stronger dollar lessening Mexican importers' buying power will hurt exports more than the tariffs, Riggan said. Zirkle agreed.

The tariffs are muted by three major shippers still being allowed to ship at zero tariff, others at low tariffs and Washington has a smaller crop this year with a large



Dan Wheat/Capital Press
Workers load Fuji apples onto trays for packing at Washington Fruit & Produce, Yakima, Wash., Dec. 8. Some Fuji and Gala go to Mexico, but mainly Red and Golden Delicious.

part of it already sold, said Chris Schlect, president of the Northwest Horticultural Council in Yakima.

Heavy U.S. apple shipments to Mexico traditionally are from January through April after the Mexican domestic crop is mostly sold out. Mexico is the largest export market of U.S. apples.

Mexico announced the tariffs Jan. 6 to take effect Jan. 7 and remain in place until its investigation of dumping allegations is complete. The Ministry of Economia indicates there is "sufficient evidence" that U.S. companies sold apples in Mexico at discriminatory prices, damaging Mexican apple producers, according to a USDA GAIN (Global Agricultural Information Network) report of Jan. 7.

More than 40 Washington apple packers responded to a Ministry of Economia questionnaire a year ago and 12 were chosen for further review to determine if they would be assessed a duty.

Riggan said Chelan Fresh Marketing was dropped from the 12 that then became 11 and that he doesn't know why.

According to the GAIN report, the tariff on Zirkle Fruit Co. is 20.82 percent. The company is working to get that lowered, Mark Zirkle said.

The report lists: Broetje Orchards, Prescott, at 17.22 percent; Stemilt Growers, Wenatchee, at 10.14; Northern Fruit, East Wenatchee, 9.45; Chiawana, Yakima, 8.27; Gilbert Orchards, Yakima, 7.39; Custom Apple Packers, Wenatchee, 5.55; and Evans Fruit, Cowiche, 2.44.

Washington Fruit & Produce, Yakima, Monson Fruit Co., Selah, and CPC International Apple Co., Tieton, are all listed at zero tariff.

Producer-exporters who were among the 40 responding to the questionnaire but not among the 12 audited are at 7.55 percent and all others who didn't respond to the questionnaire are at 20.82 per-

cent, Zirkle and Riggan said.

Companies with zero or low tariffs cannot acquire fruit from a company with high tariffs and ship it to Mexico, Zirkle said. "It has to be from your own storage," he said.

"With our prices already high compared to last year and our strong dollar, this will slow exports to Mexico even more. The question is how much product still goes from those at zero," said Desmond O'Rourke, a retired Washington State University agricultural economist in Pullman.

Todd Fryhover, president of the Washington Apple Commission which promotes exports, could not be reached for comment.

Northwest Fruit Exporters, Yakima, which manages export procedures for the industry, issued a statement saying it is evaluating next steps, believes the anti-dumping duties are unjustified and is disappointed Mexico didn't terminate the investigation and dismiss the petition.

El Nino conditions already weakening

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — As robust storms continue to move through California, El Nino conditions in the Pacific Ocean are already starting to weaken, a National Weather Service expert says.

Sea surface temperatures in the equatorial Pacific that serve as a key fuel for the weather phenomenon are starting to cool, although a strong El Nino is expected to persist in the Northern Hemisphere through the winter, said Michelle Mead, a National Weather Service warning coordinator.

The current weather pat-

tern, fed by a dominant subtropical southern jet stream, is typical for a strong El Nino winter, Mead said in an email. But uncertainty is emerging as to whether the pattern will remain for the entire winter, particularly for Northern California, she said.

"The precipitation and snowpack for this winter are still going to be storm-by-storm dependent," Mead said. "As we've stated before, even an average winter will not save us from a four-year deficit."

Sea-surface and atmospheric conditions are expected to return to neutral by late spring or early summer, marking an end to the current El Nino.

The update comes as a

steady stream of storms have been pelting California since late fall, giving the Sierra Nevada 103 percent of its normal snowpack as of Jan. 11. However, the mountains have still only accumulated 45 percent of their average snowpack for April 1, according to the state Department of Water Resources.

In addition, many areas are struggling to maintain average seasonal precipitation. For instance, Redding has sopped up 4.7 inches of rain for the month as of Jan. 12, well above its normal 2.2 inches for the period, but its 14.57 inches since Oct. 1 is slightly behind its average of 15.05 inches, according to the National Weather Service.

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