Ocean conditions portend uncertain weather across West

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — Weather forecasters are backing off their earlier prediction that La Nina atmospheric conditions would drive weather patterns this fall and winter.

That means all bets are off when it comes to how — and how many — storms will approach the West Coast, advises Michelle Mead, a National Weather Service warning coordinator.

The federal Climate Prediction Center had previously issued a "watch" for La Nina — a mixture of atmospheric and ocean surface temperatures that tends to steer storms toward the Pacific Northwest and Northern California.

But the center abandoned the La Nina watch as ocean surface temperatures dropped to neutral, portending neutral oceanic conditions that don't influence storms in a particular direction as they approach the coast.

"(T)here are no strong atmospheric signals to indicate strong correlations to winter conditions," Mead said in an email.

She said people can "get the dart board out" as winter outlooks show equal chances of above-, near- or below-normal precipitation throughout virtually the entire West.

For the Central Valley and much of the West, an early-season reprieve in the form of ample rainfall may be elusive. From December through April, the Climate Prediction Center sees a good chance of wetter-than-normal conditions only in parts of the inland Northwest, including Eastern Washington, northeastern Oregon and Northern and Central Idaho.

A drier-than-normal winter is expected in Southern California, while the rest of the West could go either way, according to the center's long-range models.

The U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook expects the drought to persist in most of California and in Eastern Oregon through Dec. 31. The U.S. Drought Monitor still shows abnormally dry conditions or moderate drought throughout the West, with Central California still rated as in extreme or exceptional drought.

For the Golden State, a return to neutral oceanic conditions after a year-long El Nino could mean more dry winters after one good-but-not-great precipitation season in many areas.

As the water year draws to a close, Redding's 40.49 inches of rainfall for the year topped its average of 34.32 annual inches, and more rain in the area was possible late this week, according to the National Weather Service. Fresno's 14.29 inches since last Oct. 1 is above its normal annual rainfall total of 11.4 inches.

But Sacramento will likely finish on Sept. 30 with slightly below-average precipitation, with 16.19 inches for the season compared to its normal 18.37 inches, according to the weather service.

The season was largely capped off with big storms in March that filled Northern California reservoirs and enabled the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to give full water allocations to Northern California farms.

But in a majority of past years when sea surface temperatures across the equatorial Pacific remained mostly average, California's rain and snow totals were below normal, Mead noted.

College students find a novel use for kale

Eric Mortenson/Capital Press
Yesenia Gallardo offers bites of mealworms during the collegiate Cleantech Challenge held in conjunction with Oregon Best Fest. Her startup company, Ento Foods, makes oils and protein powder from crickets and mealworms, and won $15,000 to advance its work.

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

A team of students from Lewis & Clark College near Portland found a use for the vegetable that people either love or love to hate: kale.

The team, called Kale Tek, figured out a way to extract wax from kale leaves and produce a waterproofing agent that can be sprayed, dipped or rubbed on a wide range of material.

Kale Tek was one of 10 semi-finalists competing in Portland State University's Cleantech Challenge earlier this month. The college-level competition was held in conjunction with the annual Oregon Best Fest event, which highlights the work of innovative entrepreneurs. Many of the energy, water and waste-stream products and startup companies supported through Oregon Best's collaborative network of university researchers have agricultural applications.

The Kale Tek team didn't win the college competition; that went to Ento Foods, which produces oils and protein powder from meal worms and crickets. Team members Yesenia Gallardo and Charles Wilson won the $10,000 grand prize and a $5,000 "best pitch" award. During Best Fest, they cheerfully offered bites of dried bugs to people who stopped by their booth.

Kale Tek, however, may have attracted more nods of recognition. Team member Emily Kelley acknowledged hearing many wisecracks about finally finding a use for kale. It's commonly grown by small farm operations, used in juice and hailed for its supposed health benefits, but critics say it's bitter and more hyped than wholesome.

There's an "I Hate Kale" Facebook page and an "I Hate Kale Cookbook." In an appearance on the Conan O'Brien show a few years ago, comedian Jim Gaffigan cracked that he looked at a can of bug spray and it read, "Made with real kale." He also joked that kale's ubiquitous market presence was a plot by the trendy grocery chain Whole Foods. "What else can we sell these idiots?" he imagined the store's leaders planning.

Another comedian, Marc Maron, said there are only two ways to eat kale: Sadly or self-righteously.

But kale, with its dark green, crinkly appearance, also is notable for the way water runs off its leaves. Called the "lotus effect," it's a result of the protective wax layer on kale and some other plants.

The Kale Tek team, formed in a entrepreneurial "Technology of the Future" class at Lewis & Clark College, was intrigued by putting those properties to use.

They learned to extract the plant's wax by placing leaves in pressurized liquid-gas system. Kelley said the team recovered 1.5 grams of wax for every 50 grams of wet kale, and about 2.5 grams of wax per 50 grams of dried kale.

Finding more kale to process won't be difficult, Kelley said.

"Kale is well known, abundant and easy to grow," she said. "Kale is everywhere — especially in Portland."

In other results, the Oregon company TryEco LLC won the $10,000 Cascadia Clean Tech Prize. The company makes a starch-based, biodegradable product called AgriSorb, which absorbs 200 to 1,000 times its weight in water and releases it while the plant is growing.

Canadian dairy proposal draws wide opposition

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

Dairy organizations in the U.S., European Union, Australia and New Zealand are calling on their trade and agriculture officials to stop a new Canadian dairy policy, saying it will expand that country's already protectionist policies on dairy trade.

The organizations, including the U.S. Dairy Export Council, the International Dairy Foods Association and National Milk Producers Federation, sent a joint letter to the officials on Monday to initiate World Trade Organization dispute settlement proceedings to challenge the new policy, once its details are announced.

The new policy — included in the new Agreement in Principle negotiated between Canada's dairy farmers and milk processors — would favor the substitution of domestic dairy ingredients for imported ingredients and unfairly subsidize Canadian dairy exports, the U.S. groups contend.

If ratified, the agreement would take effect Nov. 1.

Opposing dairy groups believe it would contravene Canada's WTO and North American Free Trade Agreement obligations and undermine the intent of the pending Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement involving 12 countries and the Canada-EU Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement.

Among other things, the new policy establishes a new ingredient milk class priced to undercut imports, providing both an incentive to substitute domestic ingredients for foreign products and a subsidy on the production of products containing those ingredients, the groups contend.

The groups say they are even more concerned the new policy will include measures to enable Canada to export surplus skim milk powder below the cost of production, circumventing its WTO obligation to end all export subsidies by the end of 2020.

The U.S. dairy groups had already registered their concerns with the new policy and last week praised Sens. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., and Tammy Baldwin, D-Wis., for urging an investigation into Canadian dairy policy.

Canada's pricing system consists of convoluted and complex regulatory tools and its milk classing structure is intentionally used to block imports, Shawna Morris, USDEC vice president of trade policy told the Capital Press.

The international group of dairy trade organizations said Canada has imposed trade limitations through numerous programs over the past few years.

"Canada's increasingly protectionist policies violate their international trade obligations, hold out the prospect of trade diversions with attendant global price-depressing impacts, and are in conflict with the principles of free markets and fair and transparent trade," they stated.

Officials of the U.S. dairy groups issued a press release voicing their indignation over the latest in Canada's dairy trade track record.

"Canada's continued disregard for the provisions in its pacts with trade partners is unacceptable," said Connie Tipton, president and CEO of the International Dairy Foods Association.

NMPF President and CEO Jim Mulhern stated, "The dairy trade situation with Canada has gone from bad to worse this year and now Canada is contemplating doubling down on that terrible track record."

USDEC President Tom Suber said, "For years U.S. exporters have borne the brunt of a continuing procession of new Canadian policy tools intended to curtail dairy imports. … Canada's been doing its best to erode longstanding existing access as much as possible before this agreement is even put in place."

Costa Rican farmers 'amazed' with Idaho dry bean seed industry

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

WILDER, Idaho — Costa Rican dry bean industry representatives who toured Southern Idaho last week said they were "amazed" by the quality of the state's bean seed production.

Idaho is the national leader in dry bean seed production and the Idaho Bean Commission brought the Costa Rican contingent here with the hope of convincing them to purchase Idaho seed in the future.

"We are amazed at what your bean seed industry is doing," said Alberto Castillo, manager of Alimentos 5000, a Costa Rican seed distributor.

Castillo said he was impressed with the Idaho State Department of Agriculture's seed certification program that ensures dry bean seed in Idaho is disease-free.

The four-person Costa Rican contingent visited ISDA's seed and plant pathology labs in Boise, where ISDA employees walked them through the certification program's various testing protocols and answered questions.

Sean Ellis/Capital Press
Costa Rican farmer Mario Vargas inspects a dry bean field near Nampa, Idaho, on Sept. 15. Four Costa Rican bean industry representatives toured Idaho Sept. 14-15 to gain a better understanding of the state's dry bean seed industry.

They also toured the University of Idaho Kimberly research center, where several bean studies are underway.

IBC members have been to Costa Rica twice on trade missions and the commission felt it was important to bring them to Idaho so they could verify what they have been told, said IBC Administrator Andi Woolf-Weibye.

"You can talk about it all day long but until you actually experience it, it's not the same," said IBC board member and Treasure Valley Seed Co. Production Manager Don Tolmie.

Idaho dry bean seed will cost Costa Rican farmers more to purchase and the strong U.S. dollar makes it a tough sell at the moment, Tolmie said.

But he said the commission is confident Idaho seed can significantly improve the yields of Costa Rican bean farmers, making it economically beneficial for them to use it.

Idaho bean seed needs to exceed current Costa Rican yields by about 35 to 40 percent to be economically feasible, he said.

"I think we can probably beat it by 75 to 80 percent," Tolmie said.

After two days touring Southern Idaho, where most of Idaho's dry bean seed is grown, Castillo said he believes Idaho bean seed can improve the yields of farmers in his country by about 50 percent.

The biggest issue facing Costa Rican bean farmers is yields and increasing them is that industry's main goal, he said.

"We believe we can improve yields by almost 50 percent by using Idaho seed," he said. "We have gone 25 to 30 years without developing a new seed variety and that's why we are very interested in (Idaho) bean seed."

Castillo said the next step will be to convince Costa Rican farmers that using Idaho bean seed will benefit them.

Idaho seed companies will send free pallets of seed to Costa Rica so test plots can be established there, enabling farmers to see the results themselves.

"We think we can manage some trials in Costa Rica and demonstrate with numbers that it does work," Castillo said. "It will be better to invest a little bit of money because you are going to get 50 percent more yields."

Idaho cropland rent increases in 2016, bucking national trend

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — Farmland became more expensive to rent in Idaho this year, despite low commodity prices, and farmers and ag economists are struggling to explain why.

Cash rent expense for all cropland in Idaho rose 6.3 percent in 2016 compared with 2015, according to estimates by USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Nationwide, overall cropland rental expense declined an estimated 6 percent and it also decreased by that amount in neighboring Oregon and Washington, according to NASS.

"That's hard to explain," state Sen. Jim Patrick, a Republican farmer from Twin Falls, said about the increase in Idaho cropland rental expenses. "I'm a little surprised by that."

He wasn't the only one, as land appraisers, ag economists and other farmers were also perplexed by the rise in cropland rental expenses in Idaho.

"I have no clue why they're up," said Bob Morrison, an independent ag land appraiser in Idaho Falls. He said several rental leases he has looked at this year show cropland rental expenses down by about 10 percent.

Rental expenses for non-irrigated cropland in Idaho decreased 6 percent in 2016, which is in line with what happened in Oregon, Washington and nationwide.

But rental rates for irrigated cropland in Idaho rose 9.8 percent over 2015. According to NASS, irrigated cropland rental expenses in Washington and Oregon were flat compared with 2015 and they were down 1.4 percent nationwide.

The Idaho numbers were based on 3,530 returned surveys.

Shelley farmer Stan Searle said a possible reason for the Idaho increase could be that there was a scarcity of available cropland in the region last fall when most leases were being signed.

"In October and November ... when most people were signing their leases ... they couldn't find any farm ground," he said.

Morrison agreed that could be a possible reason for the increased rental rates. "The only reason could be a shortage of land for sale or lease," he said.

According to NASS, the average rental rate for all cropland in Idaho this year was an estimated $168 an acre, an increase of $10 an acre over 2015. The average rate for irrigated cropland was $225 an acre, an increase of $20, while non-irrigated cropland averaged $61 an acre, down from $65 last year.

Patrick said the increase was likely due to competition for acres to grow potatoes or sugar beets, two of the high-value crops in the region.

Some of the state's highest cropland rental rates were in Eastern and southcentral Idaho, where most of the state's potatoes and sugar beets are grown. Rates exceeded $300 an acre in three counties in that region.

"I'd attribute it to those two crops," Patrick said. "If you don't have one of those two crops, you can't pay that kind of price."

University of Idaho agricultural economist Hernan Tejeda, who was also surprised by the increase, said more farmers turning to potatoes and sugar beets instead of wheat is a plausible reason for the increase.

"That's a reasonable explanation," he said.

Morrison and others said they would be surprised if Idaho cropland rental rates were up again in 2017.

"There's no question they will (be down next year)," he said.