

# Q&A: Drought-weary California hopes El Nino means wet winter

August 14 2015, by Scott Smith

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In this June 25, 1998 file photo, a Caltrans bulldozer terraces a sliding hillside below the condemned home above Pacific Coast Highway near Las Flores Canyon Road in Malibu, Calif. The home and at least one other at the top of the slide was scheduled for demolition. Federal meteorologists said Thursday that the current El Nino is already the second strongest on record for this time of year and could go down as one of the most potent weather changers of the past 65 years. The National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration recorded unusual warmth in the Pacific Ocean the last three months. El Nino is a heating of the equatorial Pacific that changes weather worldwide, mostly affecting the United States in winter. (AP Photo/Reed Saxon, File)

Chances are strong that a record-setting El Nino is headed toward California this winter. What is unknown is how it will play out for the state beset by four years of drought that fallowed farm fields, turned lawns brown and dried up streams and wells.

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## WHAT IS AN EL NINO?

Every few years, winds shift in the Pacific Ocean along the equator, warming the water more than usual. These El Nino events trigger changing weather patterns globally and can increase chances of heavy rain and snow pelting California.

Forecasters say this one is already the second strongest on record for this time of year and could be one of the most potent weather changers in 65 years. It's been unofficially named Bruce Lee after the action hero.

Satellite measurement show that this El Nino is now more powerful than a king-sized one in 1997-98, which started weaker and finished stronger, said NASA oceanographer Bill Patzert, who compared it to Godzilla for the mudslides and destruction it can cause.

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## WILL IT END CALIFORNIA'S DROUGHT?

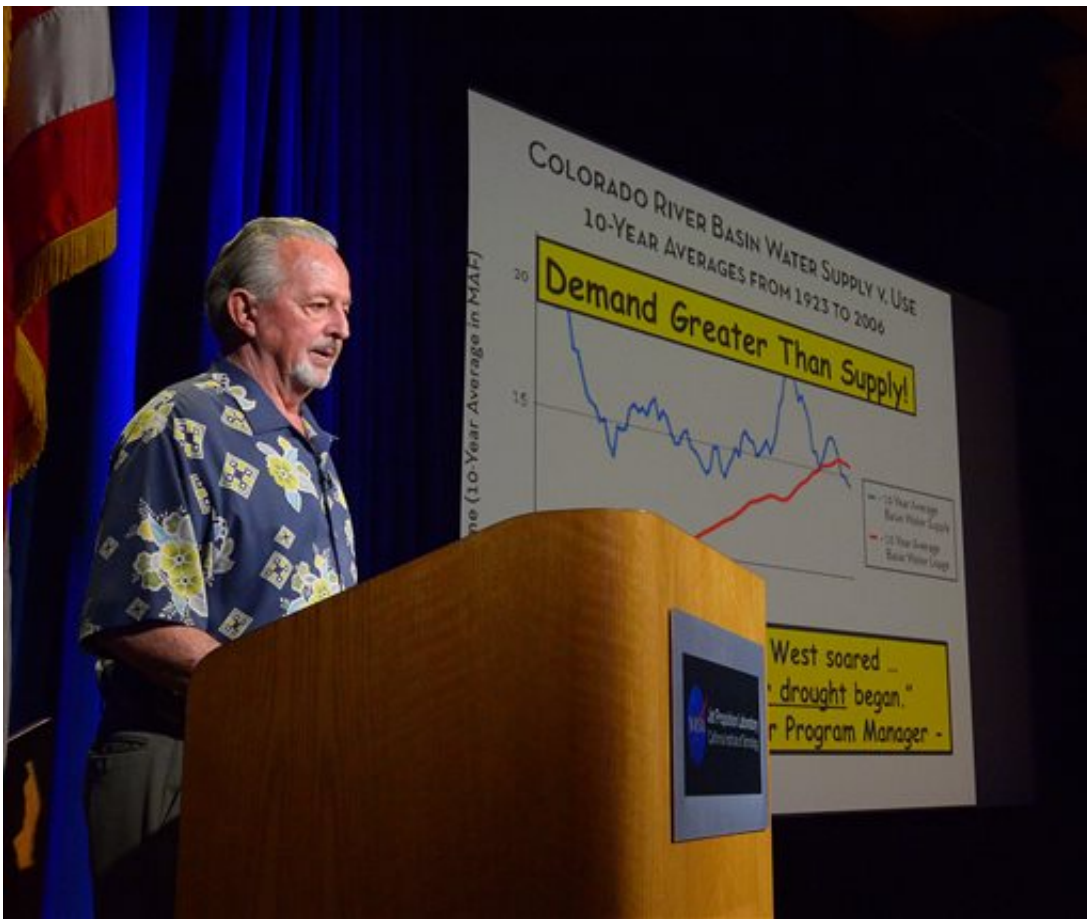
Chances are 50-50 of the El Nino delivering a wet winter, says California's state climatologist Michael Anderson. Since 1958, there have been seven El Nino systems—three wet, three dry and one average. Anderson says it's too soon to predict a wet winter. Five of the Sierra Nevada's 10 skimpiest snowpacks on record have occurred in the last decade.

California needs 1 ½ times the amount of normal rainfall to pull itself from drought, says Mike Halpert, deputy director of the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration's Climate Prediction Center.

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## ARE THERE DOWNSIDES?

While few argue that California needs a wet one, wildfires raging across the state this summer set the stage for flooding and mudslides. Daniel Berlant of the state's Department of Forestry and Fire Protection says crews already have battled 1,500 more fires than a normal year.



NASA oceanographer Bill Patzert speaks about an El Nino weather system that

could strike California in late fall or early winter Thursday, Aug. 13, 2015, in Pasadena, Calif. The current El Nino, nicknamed Bruce Lee, is already the second strongest on record for this time of year and could be one of the most potent weather changers of the past 65 years, federal meteorologists say. (AP Photo/Jayne Kamin-Oncea)

Fire can harden the ground, creating the chances of floods, or it can burn off vegetation that holds soil in place, creating mudslides.

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## WHAT DO FARMERS THINK?

They're cautiously optimistic. Ryan Jacobsen, executive director of the Fresno County Farm Bureau, says farmers aren't fooled by a common misconception that El Nino always translates into a wet winter.



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Early signs point to a good winter ahead, but California's rainy season doesn't start until October, more than one month away.

"The one constant with Mother Nature is that she's always changing," Jacobsen said.

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