

EL NIÑO WEATHER

Prairies to see little moisture

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MEDICINE HAT, Alta. — A mild winter and dry spring are in the forecast and that could make for a stressful planting season in 2016.

Drew Lerner of World Weather Inc. told those at an Oct. 27 Farming Smarter seminar that farmers might be well advised to preserve all soil moisture they can this fall and winter.

That might be tricky given already dry soil moisture conditions but any efforts might help see them through until May or June, when he predicts average precipitation levels on the Prairies will resume.

"We do see signs of improvement as we move through the growing season," he said.

El Niño, the weather condition associated with warm water in the equatorial Pacific region, is the biggest factor in weather news now, said Lerner.

As it stands, the current El Niño is among the strongest ever measured but that doesn't mean its effects will be correspondingly stronger. That will depend on how long it lasts and Lerner predicts it will be relatively short-lived.

"All we really should care about is what are the typical anomalies that go with such a strong event."

Lerner said El Niño is now at its peak and will weaken toward spring. That typically means British Columbia and Alberta will get less snow and rain than average and southern Manitoba will get more.

For the rest of the Prairies, the El Niño effect is typically benign.

As well, El Niño usually means a warmer than average winter across most of the Prairies, extending into Eastern Canada and the U.S. plains.

The position of the jet stream led Lerner to say the odds are good for avoiding major snowstorms as the country moves into the heart of winter.

The three strongest El Niños occurred in 1972-73, 1982-83 and 1997-98. Predictions for 2016 can be based in part on what happened in the season following those events, Lerner said.

"Those were all years in which significant dryness occurred in parts of the U.S."

The other driving force for weather is the 18-year cycle, said Lerner. He suggested 2016 might have similarities with the growing seasons of 1997-98 and 1979-80. Both those years were warmer than average.

However, summer 2016 so far shows a wetter than normal bias. Lerner said there are no indications so far of a looming long-term moisture deficit but current indications show a dry spring that might work against those who plant early.

In the U.S., Lerner said there are indications for a wet spring and a dry summer in 2016. Based on the 18-year cycle, conditions there could look much like those of 1980, which was hot and dry, especially in the Midwest.

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