



Grazier

► by Kindra Gordon

Watching the weather

Wouldn't it be nice to know if this winter was going to be colder than normal, or to have an idea if next spring's precipitation was expected to be above — or below — average? Weather forecasting technology does track such outlooks, and the Internet now makes it possible for producers to watch weather trends from their home computers.

Forecasting

Brian Fuchs, regional climatologist with the High Plains Regional Climate Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), says there are several forecast tools available on a variety of Web sites that can help producers prepare for weather trends that are expected for the next two or three months, and even 12 months ahead.

Fuchs explains that these forecast tools are not pinpointing what the temperature will be on a specific day, but instead are designed to give weather trends and patterns for a particular region. For instance, they predict if temperatures are expected to be warmer or cooler than average for a given time frame and if precipitation is expected to be above or below normal during that time.

"When making grazing decisions, monitoring temperature and precipitation

outlooks for a region for one to six months ahead can help producers evaluate decisions for their ranching operations," Fuchs says. For instance, a producer may decide to wean calves earlier if the outlook is for below normal precipitation. Or, a producer may consider buying additional stockers to graze if abundant precipitation is expected.

He adds, "The drought the last few years has already forced many producers to evaluate weather trends and their ranch practices to see what they can do to streamline their operations."

What to watch

When tracking weather trends, Fuchs says a starting point is to keep an eye on what's happening around the globe. "A major weather event in one part of the world does affect other parts of the world. So it is good to be aware of that," he says.

He suggests tracking global climate models, as well as climate conditions, for your local area, because they all interact. For instance, global climate models can help identify the onset of an *El Niño* or *La Niña* weather event beginning in the Pacific Ocean. (An *El Niño* is the warming of the tropical waters of the Pacific; whereas, *La Niña* is a cooling of the tropical waters.)

These can create large-scale weather systems that will affect the entire United States at once. An *El Niño* will typically have a positive influence on precipitation from October through December and through spring and summer across the Western Dakotas, Nebraska, Wyoming and Colorado. A *La Niña* typically means colder temperatures through fall and winter.

One of Fuchs' favorite sites for producers interested in monitoring weather patterns is the Climate Prediction Center Web site at www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov. It provides global climate models up to a year ahead, as well as short-term outlooks for the upcoming eight to 14 days. The site updates global climate trends monthly and offers links to several useful weather sites.

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What is the weather outlook?

For the next six months, University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) climatologist Brian Fuchs says indications are for the central part of the country to stay in a wetter pattern, with temperatures expected to be below normal. Thus, he says the western Dakotas, Nebraska, Wyoming and Colorado should see some improvement in drought conditions.

The winter forecast is also trending toward normal

temperatures and precipitation, which Fuchs says is a good thing, since even "normal" weather conditions can help with some drought recovery.

"We are neutral with *El Niño* and *La Niña*. There appears to be no significant warming or cooling down of the Pacific tropical waters over the next six to 10 months. Thus, no erratic weather is expected," Fuchs reports.

Weather forecast Web sites

Climate Prediction Center Forecasts and Outlooks
National Weather Service Location Map
Daily Climate Monitoring Page
U.S. Drought Monitor
ENSO (*El Niño*, *La Niña* Forecasts)
Short-Term Weather Forecasts
Current Weather Conditions
High Plains Regional Climate Center
All Regional Climate Centers
Climate Prediction Center home page
El Niño/La Niña home page

www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/forecasts
www.crh.noaa.gov
www.hprcc.unl.edu/products/current.html
<http://drought.unl.edu/dm/monitor.html>
www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/analysis_monitoring/lanina/ensoforecast.html
www.nco.ncep.noaa.gov/pmb/nwprod/analysis
www.hprcc.unl.edu/nevit
www.hprcc.unl.edu
www.rcc-acis.org
www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov
www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/analysis_monitoring/lanina

To specifically track the *El Niño* or *La Niña* forecasts, visit www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/analysis_monitoring/lanina/ensoforecast.html. Here, the actual sea surface temperatures are provided with forecasts 12 months out. An indicator of a strong *El Niño* would be sea temperatures 4°-5° Celsius (C) above normal. Temperatures 3° below average would indicate a strong *La Niña*.

Fuchs explains that *El Niño* and *La Niña* are natural occurrences every few years, but there is no exact cycle. They do influence temperatures and precipitation across the United States when they occur and usually last six to eight months, but they may last up to 18 months.

How might a producer prepare if an *El Niño* or *La Niña* is forecasted? Fuchs suggests that in a *La Niña* instance — where temperatures may be below normal in the October to December time frame — a producer may want to be sure to have adequate feed supplies to take care of herds during that time of potentially colder weather.

In an *El Niño* instance, with a tendency for wetter-than-normal conditions October to

March, producers with spring-calving herds may want to make special preparations to get newborn calves out of the wet weather, Fuchs says.

Fuchs suggests that producers may also make adjustments to grazing and haying decisions if an *El Niño* is forecast, where wetter conditions may produce more available forage, vs. if a *La Niña* is predicted.

Other useful info

If you are seeking specific weather details for your area, Fuchs recommends the National Weather Service Location Map at www.crh.noaa.gov/. This site allows you to click on a local area to track current climate conditions and next week's forecast.

He also suggests that producers utilize drought maps online, which offer precipitation totals and show the departure from normal in both percent and inches — or any drought recovery that is occurring. “This is a tool to monitor conditions and base forage decisions on,” he says. See the U.S. Drought Monitor at <http://drought.unl.edu/dm/monitor.html>.

Lastly, Fuchs says weather outlooks are a tool that should be followed on a regular basis. “It is not a tool that a producer should look at one month and make operational business decisions on,” he cautions,

explaining that these outlooks, like several weather models, will trend in one direction or another, with adjustments made to them during monthly updates.

Fuchs adds, “By following the trends of the outlooks, one can get a feel for how reliable they have been or will be in the future. For example, if the outlook is showing above normal rain for a period on several consecutive updates, one would have a little more faith in that depiction than if it had just shown up on the outlook. For the most part, these are reliable, but should not be used as the only tools for a producer. Instead, they should be used as a complement to other weather monitoring that the producer does.”

If you do not have access to the Internet, Fuchs still encourages producers to listen to weather trends and outlooks provided by local experts, such as their state climatologist, Extension specialist or Farm Service Agency (FSA) staff, as these individuals are provided with climate outlook information on a regular basis.

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