

July 10, 2009

El Nino's return may be stormy

Forecasters warn of more active tropical cyclone season this year

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Hawai'i could be in for a busier-than-normal hurricane season thanks to a return of El Nino, which spurs warmer sea surface temperatures in the Pacific and was seen during four of the five most active tropical cyclone seasons in the Central Pacific on record.

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration officials announced yesterday that El Nino weather patterns were back, and Hawai'i forecasters and civil defense planners said that though the news isn't reason to panic, it should move people to be more prepared.

During El Nino years, "we tend to see a more active tropical cyclone season," said Ray Tanabe, warning coordination meteorologist for the National Weather Service in the Islands. "It increases the risk for us slightly. It doesn't predict that one of them is going to hit us."

The Pacific last saw El Nino conditions in 1997, when forecasters tracked nine tropical cyclones in the Central Pacific. El Nino conditions were also seen in 1992 — the year Hurricane Iniki hit Kaua'i. Ten other tropical cyclones were also tracked in the Central Pacific in 1992.

Tropical cyclones include depressions, tropical storms and hurricanes.

In an average year, the central Pacific sees about four to five tropical cyclones.

This year, forecasters are predicting a 20 percent chance of seeing six or more tropical cyclones in the central Pacific, Tanabe said. There is an 80 percent chance the central Pacific will see three to five tropical cyclones, which would make it a near-normal to below-normal year.

The hurricane season in Hawai'i runs from June through November.

Tanabe said the hurricane prediction forecast, issued in May, took into account El Nino conditions. Those conditions have already started to be seen, according to NOAA scientists, who announced yesterday that sea surface temperature climbed to 1.8 degrees above normal along a narrow band in the eastern equatorial Pacific in June. In addition, NOAA's Climate Prediction Center said temperatures in other tropical regions are also above normal.

In addition to increasing the risk for tropical cyclones, El Nino conditions in Hawai'i are associated with drought and big surf during winter months. Forecasters said they expect El Nino conditions to strengthen over the next few months and stick around through early 2010.

global effect

El Nino — a periodic warming of water in the tropical Pacific Ocean — follows a period during which the Pacific was described as being in a "neutral state." El Nino conditions can affect weather patterns around the world, from decreasing the risk of Atlantic hurricanes to steering winter storms to California. It can also decrease seafood catches off the West Coast.

Civil defense planners in the Islands say they're hoping awareness about the El Nino conditions — and the slightly increased risk of cyclones — will spur more people to be prepared with emergency kits and plans. They are also working to increase the number of emergency shelters available in the Islands and are cementing plans to offer shelters for families with animals and residents with medical needs that standard shelters couldn't accommodate.

There are 267 identified hurricane shelters statewide, which can accommodate about 420,000 people. Families are also encouraged to consider sheltering-in-place if that is safest.

In case of a hurricane, households are urged to keep five to seven days of food and supplies on hand. Shelly Ichishita, state Civil Defense spokeswoman, said that's higher than the national recommendations because of Hawai'i's remote location. "Because of our geographic isolation, it's really important that people keep adequate food storage and make sure they have reserves for any medications," she said. "Personal preparedness is very important."

Ichishita added she "certainly hopes" warnings about El Nino spur more preparedness.

More storms

No cyclones have been tracked so far this year in the central Pacific. Only one was seen in 2008.

Forecasters said four of the busiest hurricane seasons on record coincided with El Nino. In 1997, the last year El Nino conditions were seen in the Pacific, sea surface temperatures near the equator in the eastern Pacific rose upward of 4 degrees Fahrenheit, while sea surface temperatures in the Central Pacific rose 1.8 to 4.8 degrees Fahrenheit.

The National Weather Service says the 1997 season had the fourth highest number of tropical cyclones in the central Pacific since complete records were started in 1961 — when the weather service started to use satellites to help track storms. The busiest years for cyclones in the Central Pacific were 1994 and 1992, when 11 storms were tracked.

Meanwhile, 10 tropical cyclones were tracked in 1982.

Hurricane Iniki was the sixth cyclone to be tracked in the Central Pacific in 1992, hitting Kaua'i in September. It was blamed for six deaths and caused billions of dollars in damage.

Meanwhile, there were 13 cyclones tracked in 1978, which was not an El Nino year.

Additional Facts

Hurricane preparedness tips

- Know the history of high wave and storm surge, high winds, and heavy rains and flash flooding in your area.
- Learn the location of officially designated civil defense shelters for your area.
- Check the condition of emergency equipment, such as flashlights and battery-powered radios.
- Ensure that enough nonperishable food and water is on hand to last for at least five to seven days.
- Prepare a survival kit for home use or to take to a shelter. Use the list in your telephone book as a guideline.
- Be aware of the structural limitations of your home and reinforce your home against high winds.
- Obtain and store materials such as plywood and plastic necessary to secure your home.
- Check your home for loose and clogged rain gutters and downspouts.
- Keep trees and shrubbery trimmed. Cut weak branches and trees that could fall or bump against the house. When trimming, try to create a channel through the foliage to the center of the tree to allow for air flow.

For more information, go to Hawai'i State Civil Defense's Web site at www.scd.hawaii.gov.
