

Big Island drought eases | Hawaii Tribune Herald

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The Big Island recently became free of extreme drought for the first time in two years, but forecasters still expect below-normal rainfall levels through the fall.

The first six months of this year have been marked by the return of rainfall that has helped reduce agricultural drought conditions in West Hawaii, although stubborn pockets of parched earth remain.

"Pastures and general vegetation conditions have been slowly improving over portions of the leeward Big Island slopes," said National Weather Service hydrologist Kevin Kodama in a report issued early this month. "However, reports from the agriculture community suggest that this recovery may be short-lived since soil moisture remains poor heading deeper into the dry season.

"One major cattle ranching operation has already started destocking herds. Another complication affecting the upslope leeward pastures is an infestation of fireweed which has replaced normal livestock grasses that were killed by the extreme to exceptional drought conditions. Fireweed is poisonous to cattle and also poses an increase in fire risk because it is not grazed."

A late-season storm even brought snow to Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa in early June. But global weather conditions are developing that favor drier conditions in coming months.

The NWS Climate Prediction Center expects a 40 percent chance of cooler and drier weather than normal for the Big Island partly as a result of the end of La Niña conditions.

La Niña, the opposite of the better-known phenomenon El Niño, is the presence of abnormally cold sea surface temperatures in the equatorial East Pacific.

While the reason for these temperature variations are not well-understood, their effects are: La Niña is usually seen in Hawaii to bring wetter weather, more snow to Big Island summits and a fewer hurricanes.

Climate scientists announced the end of La Niña in a June 9 bulletin. Sea surface temperatures are now near normal levels, but "with lingering La Niña-like atmospheric impacts, particularly in the global tropics," at least through the summer, they said.

El Niño conditions are expected to return in time, but not in the next few months.

If the weather has felt wetter than normal lately, that may just be in comparison with 2010's exceptional, record-breaking drought. In fact, rainfall totals for the year have been running far behind normal. The gauge at Hilo International Airport records 129 inches in a normal year; so far, with the "wet season" pau and the year nearly half over, the gauge has recorded only 35 inches. Much of that may be attributed to drought conditions that lingered into early 2011, however.

Recent rains have helped ease drought conditions islandwide, and according to the U.S. Drought Monitor both East Hawaii and much of Kona are free of drought.

Severe drought conditions persist along the Kohala coast, however, and much of the interior of the Big Island remains abnormally dry.

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