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## Rain eases drought but not where most needed

November 23, 2010 - By HARRY EAGAR, Staff Writer

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Haleakala Ranch Cattle Manager Greg Friel hopes for La Nina to develop in the eastern Pacific next year.

"Otherwise, things could be in dire straits" for ranchers, he said Monday.

The latest update of the National Drought Monitor finds that the yearslong drought in the islands has eased significantly in the past three months. But in parts of Maui County where rain is needed the most, it has fallen the least.

If you draw a line bisecting Maui island from north to south, everything west of the line is abnormally to extremely dry, and a sliver of coastline in Kaupo is still rated exceptionally dry, the worst category.

An area right around Kawaihae on the Big Island is the only other part of the state still rated exceptionally dry by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration's drought service.

Besides most of West and South Maui, the western half of Molokai and all of Lanai are rated extremely dry, the fourth worst of the five National Drought Monitor classifications.

However, the East Maui watershed area is not considered to be in drought now, as the early instances of winter rains are beginning to restore the streams.

Haleakala Ranch's pastures are greening up as far west as Makawao, Friel says, but "once you get to Kula" and throughout the Kihei parts of the ranch, there hasn't been any rain all year.

That is beginning to change, according to Glenn James, weather analyst.

"We are solidly into our rainy season, with the La Nina phase of the (El Nino/Southern Oscillation) cycle in force," he said in an e-mail Monday. "This typically means, although not always, that our rainy season will be somewhat wetter than normal, if not potentially a lot wetter.

"I like the way things are progressing so far, with rainfall finally starting to increase across the state, and here on Maui, too. Case in point, over here in Kihei this afternoon, looking up towards the western slopes of the crater, it's raining up there. There are even some showers falling down here in the lowlands."

To get through the drought, Haleakala Ranch has had to move many of its calves out of state, Friel says. It moved its cows around, emptying the scorched Kihei range, but if the rains don't return, he believes the ranch will have to start selling off its mature cows next season.

Parts of the Big Island's Kau district, along with extreme southern Kauai and a bit of southern Oahu, remain in the grip of drought, which has hung on now for more than five years.

From a longer perspective, the nature of the rain Maui receives seems to have changed, too. Garret Hew, general manager at East

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Maui Irrigation, notes that when he began working for the company 27 years ago, "everybody wore rubber boots every day," because it seemed that it would start raining and rain and rain and rain almost without letup for "two, three, four months."

Rubber boots are not standard equipment any more, and it seems that when rains do come, they last "one, two days," then stop.

The longest-term streamflow records, which go back almost a century, also show a pronounced long decline in the amount of rain falling on the islands.

Hew has noticed a change in the character of the runoff over the years. In the past, a heavy rain after a dry spell would wash accumulated trash into the East Maui streams, but they would quickly clear and then run for days without much silt in them. Nowadays, the water stays murky longer.

And the flow into EMI's ditch system still rises to big volumes within hours of a good rain over East Maui, but it does not maintain the flow as long as it used to.

For example, after good rains on Friday and Saturday, Nov. 12-13, the flow of the Wailoa Ditch spiked to 190 million gallons, but it was a mere 37.4 mgd the following Wednesday.

Monday morning, Hew said, it was 59 mgd. This would be good at the height of summer but is unimpressive for the wet season.

County Water Director Jeff Eng said he's also hoping for a solid La Nina. Upcountry has been under a drought watch since June 2009, and Eng said he may ask the Board of Water Supply to review that at its next meeting.

The Honolulu office of the National Weather Service says there's a good chance of a rainy La Nina winter, but Eng recalls that a forecaster once told him, "We project but we don't predict."

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