

El Niño likelihood rises

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MOST of the country is in for a substantially hotter and drier than normal summer as the chances of an El Niño increase to 70 per cent.

The Bureau of Meteorology's December-to-February outlook predicts unusually warm summer days and nights more likely for all regions, except Western Australia, south-western Victoria and Tasmania.

BoM climate monitoring manager Karl Braganza said the past 24 months had seen long-term dry conditions becoming 60 per to 70 per cent more likely during the next three months.

The warmth comes as conditions in the Pacific remain conducive to an El Niño forming in coming months, Dr Braganza said.

Surface temperatures have exceeded El Niño threshold levels for several weeks and the bureau estimates there is a greater than 70 per cent chance of an El Niño soon.

The first 11 months of the year were the warmest on record, with combined global land and sea-surface temperatures running 1.22 degrees above the 20th century average.

Though that outlook is less severe for western Victoria than was forecast in November's three-month outlook, BoM climate prediction service manager Andrew Watkins said the odds still slightly favour warmer conditions.

According to the BoM's latest drought statement, most of eastern Australia and the Top End had below-average rainfall in November.

The most significant dry weather is expected in the northern parts of the continent, where graziers are hoping for monsoonal rainfall to alleviate harsh conditions.



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"Rainfall has been below average across large parts of eastern Australia for most of 2014; rainfall deficiencies across parts of the east have been exacerbated by particularly dry conditions during the past two months," Dr Braganza said.

"Overall, rainfall during the second half of the southern growing season (July to November) has been below to very much below average across most of southeast Australia, coinciding with record-warm temperatures."

Across NSW and drought-affected Queensland, graziers are pleased that rain of around 25 millimetres has been fairly widespread. There are also reports of up to 100 millimetres in some areas.

Ben Thomas of Meat and Livestock Australia said farmers will need to be confident that they have enough feed and enough water before they slow the movement of their cattle to the saleyards. "We are going to have to see follow-up rain and rejuvenated pastures before graziers get really confident enough to restock."

Mr Thomas said prices are heading up and export demand will still be very strong as more rain comes.

With the drought biting in eastern Australia, the biggest drop is in cropping, with crop production down 11 per cent and earnings for export crops forecast to be 15 per cent lower to \$19 billion.

In March 2014, the Queensland drought was declared to be the most widespread on record, with 80 per cent of the state thought affected.

Bundaberg mayor Mal Forman said people's concerns in dealing with drought have been heard by the government's June drought assistance package. Farmers need rain and assistance

"Many of our farmers are hurting and struggle, and we need the rain and assistance badly .??. Any rain will help from an emotional perspective firstly."

The Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences chief commodity analyst, Jammie Penm, said the drought and below-average rainfall have cut farm production.

"We are forecasting farm production in aggregate will be about 5.9 per cent lower in 2014-15. That reflects the impact of adverse seasonal conditions on agricultural production. Of course, that will also flow through to our export performance."

Dr Penm said dry conditions have affected both cropping and livestock, with a lower winter crop production, while in the livestock sector the drought has resulted in increased slaughter rates.

"Production will increase, but of course when seasonal conditions improve later on there will be herd and flock rebuilding, so the dynamic of the impact will be different across different industries."

"Partially offsetting this negative impact has been a lower Australian dollar, but all in all the dairy industry and the cropping industry, we do expect their export earnings to be lower for this financial year."

In discussing the outlook and possible impacts of an El Niño occurring in Australia, Dr Braganza said there were some noticeable changes that had been recorded over the last three months.

"We've seen some impacts around Australia, the dry conditions through inland Australia, particularly in eastern Australia and parts of the south, and those warm conditions and those heatwaves that have been pumping through, are not to be unexpected when you are at this sort of level."

<http://www.farmonline.com.au/news/agriculture/general/news/el-nio-likelihood-rises/2720481.aspx?storypage=0>