

# The Winter Without Snow (or Rain)

By Bob Quinn

## Have the weather gods gone mad?

There was an all-time record rain in Los Angeles of 36 inches this winter, with floods galore. Yet in our neck of the woods, our ski areas closed down early due to lack of snow, which was then followed by an anomalous snowfall March 20-April 20 producing more snow than fell all winter.

No, not madness – just another frustrating drought winter in the Northwest.

After studying and teaching climatology for 37 years here at Eastern, I've seen every conceivable type of winter. This one wasn't even the worst.

I remember the winter of 1968-69 when 50 inches of snow fell in January, and it snowed 28 out of 31 days that month. I also remember the drought of 1976-77 when only 7.2 inches of precipitation fell the whole year.

The winter we just experienced has been a particularly dry one, it's true, as only 7.4 inches of precipitation fell versus a normal 11.2 inches – and only 25 inches of snow versus a normal 46 inches.

The culprit has been a weak El Niño pattern that caused the storm track to split, with most of the wet storms going south into California and into the Southwest, where the blossoming desert was something to behold this spring. There, the seeds can lie dormant in the soil for decades until just the right conditions prevail, like this year, and everything bursts into color.

But, this left the Northwest high and dry, and the results are right outside our window. The ponds are only half full, and many nesting wildfowl have moved north as our local ponds will likely go dry before July.

The real serious moisture deficits are in the Cascades and Selkirk mountains where only 25 to 45 percent of normal snow water exists. This means many rivers – like the Spokane and Yakima – may see record low summer flows. The upper Columbia River in Canada is in fair shape, but even the Columbia will have about 70 percent of normal runoff.

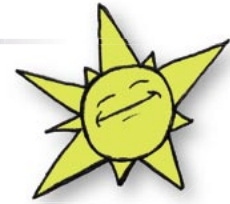
This means serious concerns for fish passage, power generation and irrigation water – and the potential for a severe summer fire season.

But, let me offer some good news.

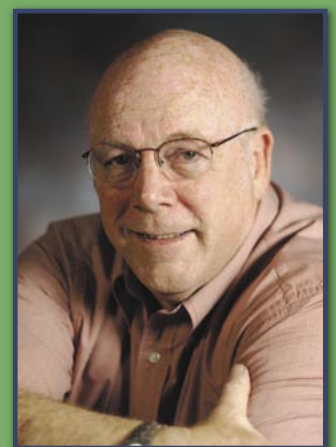
El Niño, the winter's warm and dry pattern, is gone, so hopefully next winter will be a wetter one. Frankly, I want to enjoy the ducks and geese nesting in my back pond – which they haven't done in three years.

It's too early for a scientific prediction, as we'll have to keep an eye on what the sea temperatures are doing in the coming months. But don't forget, we weather guys are born optimists. And that can't hurt.

*P.S. Since I first wrote these words, two to three inches of rain have been delivered in the local area in May. This has helped soil moisture and has even added some water to the local wetlands. It will not help the mountain snowpack, as it is already gone, but it will certainly push the fire season back to mid-summer. Pray for a cool summer.*



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Dr. Robert Quinn, professor of geography, holds a Ph.D. in geography from Oregon State University. His main areas of expertise are in meteorology-climatology, oceanography and wetlands science, with research focusing on Pacific Northwest weather patterns and local wetland ecology. He lives on 40 acres of paradise in the Cheney scablands with a seasonal pond (now dry!) down the hill from his house. He is teaching a three-week course *The Atmospheric Environment* (GEOG 204) June 20-July 8 during Summer Session.