

The San Diego Union-Tribune.

Usual winter rain has been held back by a stubborn ridge

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Our local drought has reached biblical proportions. San Diego has not had measurable rain in more than 40 days and 40 nights. What's next, gnats and locusts? Our last rain fell Jan. 2.

Long dry spells are nothing new to San Diegans. We often go at least 100 straight days without rain. But those droughts generally come during late spring, summer and early fall, when no one expects rain.

This is our longest winter dry spell in at least eight years. San Diego generally gets more than 60 percent of its annual rainfall in the winter months. Rarely has the city gone six straight winter weeks – almost half the season – without catching anything. In 2001-02, our driest year ever (3.02 inches of rain), the longest dry run of the winter was 23 days. If we get no rain today, we'll be at 44 days. And counting.

Besides the rain deficit, San Diegans have had to endure very low humidity. Much of last week, the majority of the county was under a red-flag warning, meaning the fire danger was high because of high temperatures, low humidity and strong winds.

What's been going on?

A persistent ridge of high pressure has blocked storms from us and created offshore flows, or Santa Ana-type conditions. Miguel Miller, a forecaster for the National Weather Service's San Diego office, said the ridge has been stronger than usual this winter. The ridge has moved around a bit, Miller said, but its mean position has been over the West Coast. That ridge has kept the jet stream from directing storms our way.

“The ridge has allowed the jet stream to go as far south as the Bay Area, but no farther south,” Miller said.

Conditions could change this week, but that doesn't necessarily mean the floodgates will open.

“We're seeing signs of that high breaking down, but we don't see any real chance of rain yet,” Miller said. “But what I do see is that ridge going away. The jet stream is sagging southward ever so slowly.”

But the Weather Service has been teased several times with potential pattern shifts this winter. In mid-January, some forecasters thought we would be in for a wetter, colder period. The coldness arrived, but since that time, the air has been even drier than it was before. One storm approached Jan. 27, but, like many before it, it fizzled.

“Last winter, every (potential storm) gave us rain,” Miller said. “Somebody would sneeze, and it would rain.

“This winter, we've consistently seen signs that maybe we're heading into a wet pattern, and then it doesn't happen. When you work an entire winter like that, even if the models are showing it's going to rain, you begin to doubt it.”

The Climate Prediction Center, in its monthly diagnostic discussion issued last week, said that the La Niña conditions currently present in the central Pacific are likely to persist for the next three to six months. If those conditions do remain in place, Miller said, the odds appear good that 2005-06 will break the record for the driest year ever in San Diego. The seasonal total is now 1.30 inches.

But if that ridge of high pressure does get shoved aside, the jet stream could be in our vicinity, and one or two good storms could lift us over 3.02 inches, the driest year record. If we got just normal March rain (2.26 inches) and no more through the end of June, 2005-06 would go down as the third driest year since record-keeping began in 1850. No. 2 is 1960-61, when 3.46 inches fell.

“If this pattern shift occurs,” Miller said, “we could get a few last gasps of wet weather before we call an end to the season.”

■Our long dry spell, although out of the ordinary, is not entirely unprecedented. Since 1850, there have been two Januaries, two Februaries and three Marches when no rain at all was recorded during the entire month. The last time we went a winter month without any rain was in March 1997.

■Have a question or comment about the weather? Write to Weather Watch, The San Diego Union-Tribune, P.O. Box 120191, San Diego, CA 92112-0191. Or send e-mail to **rob.krier@uniontrib.com**. Weather Watch runs the first and third Wednesdays of the month. Visit the Weather Watch Web log at: www.signonsandiego.com/news/weblogs/weather