

# El Niño: Fast-moving storms cause drama, but no Bay Area flooding

By Lisa M. Krieger, Natalie Jacewicz and Mark Gomez Staff writers

Posted: 01/06/16, 8:41 PM PST | Updated: on 01/06/2016

The storms that are vaulting across the Bay Area this week are moving so fast that they feel less like a drowning than a baptism -- blessedly wet, but not inflicting any major flooding.

Here then gone, violent then silent, they've delivered more rain in two days than in the previous three Januarys combined. But most rivers and storm drains can handle such outbursts -- and remain well-behaved.

"These are fairly quick movers, rather than setting up and pounding an area," said meteorologist Jan Null of Golden Gate Weather Services in Saratoga.

Here's why: The jet stream now rushing over California is so straight that it is delivering well-spaced storms. In contrast, a kinked and slowly meandering jet stream can wreak greater havoc because its rains persist.

## Advertisement

It's classic El Nio behavior. The weather pattern gets a bad rap -- but in 1997-1998, despite dumping nearly double the normal rainfall over most of California, statewide damage totals were relatively low at \$500 million, Null said. Contrast that with New Year's Eve the year before -- an El Nio -free year -- when the state suffered \$1.8 billion of damage in a mere week.

"Our local streams have been able to carry the stormwater we've seen so far. We haven't seen any significant flooding," said Marty Grimes, a spokesman for the Santa Clara Valley Water District.

How remarkable is this January, only one week old? It's nearly twice as wet as the past three Januarys -- combined. San Jose totaled a 0.81 inches in those three months. In contrast, it has received 1.52 inches in the past 48 hours. In Oakland, it's 0.43 inches vs. 1.74 inches; in Concord, it's 0.56 inches vs. 1.17 inches.

All over the Bay Area, people and animals on Wednesday turned almost amphibious.

Cody Ramanis, an employee of the downtown San Jose cleaning service Groundwerx, donned snowboarding gear to ride his bicycle to work.

"I love it. We need this," said Andrew Beil, an employee at the downtown law firm Hopkins & Carley. "It could rain for the next two to three weeks -- and I'd be good with that."

Two sump pumps are draining water from the flat roof of San Jose State's International House. "It's like a swimming pool," said employee Kristen Pendleton.

Wet streets in the Bay Area caused nearly two dozen crashes during the Wednesday morning commute. In the Santa Cruz Mountains, downed trees blocked Highland Road and Skyview Road.

Under sullen light and low skies, there are other signs of the season: Doors swell in their jams. Pedestrians slip on sidewalks' metal grates. Rivulets rinse off gravel paths, creating mud.

Rodents are fleeing soggy fields, forcing hawks to look elsewhere for food, said South Bay naturalist Alvaro Jaramillo. Flocks of gulls and robins are venturing out to feast on worms and other invertebrates.

"Wet and soft ground is great for digging up worms," he said. "And there are lots of ponds everywhere. That means more habitat for ducks -- dabbling ducks, particularly mallard."

In gardens, moisture that has traveled hundreds of miles catches on manzanita and sage, illuminating them.

"Rainwater just seems to be kind of magic," said Walker Young, an assistant curator at Walnut Creek's public Ruth Bancroft Garden. "Plants just react differently -- whether it's the pH difference or that it's cleaner, with less particular, less solids."

In the Sierra, the top flanks of Mount Rose Ski Area near Reno have 88 inches -- more than seven feet -- of valuable powder.

But officials remain uneasy, cautioning residents to pay attention to shifting conditions.

They worry about so-called "atmospheric rivers," those narrow corridors of concentrated moisture. A different type of drama, often dubbed a "Pineapple Express," this is one of several types of atmospheric phenomenon that acts independent of the classic El Nio pattern -- and can cause major headaches.

The National Weather Service Wednesday issued a flash flood watch for the entire Bay Area. A flood watch means that flooding is likely to occur. That's different from a flood warning, which is issued when flooding is underway.

"A flood watch is a message of 'be prepared' rather than 'take action,' " said Greg Renick, spokesman for the Governor's Office of Emergency Services.

To stay safe, families should keep children from playing too close to flooding water, Renick said. Households and cars should feature an emergency kit, and families should have evacuation plans that account for children, seniors and the disabled.

The storm packed a bigger punch in Southern California, which received high winds and nearly three

inches of rain, as well as high surf and extensive flooding in the San Fernando Valley. Los Angeles authorities have spent days getting homeless people into shelters from low-lying areas along the Los Angeles River and other waterways prone to flooding.

Six Southern California counties had activated emergency operation centers as of 4:30 p.m. Wednesday, including Los Angeles, Renick said. To his knowledge, no Bay Area counties had yet activated such centers, which delegate increased authority to state agencies.

"Things seem to be going pretty well so far," Renick said.

Despite the downpours, rainfall totals in many parts of the Bay Area remain below their historic average. Since Oct. 1, San Francisco has received 8.85 inches, about 91 percent of average. At 6.23 inches of rain, San Jose is one of the few locations running above normal at 115 percent.

Another less-powerful El Nio storm was right behind Wednesday's and expected to hit land Thursday, with potential totals up to 5 inches in the Santa Cruz Mountains and 1 to 3 inches at lower elevations.

Staff writers Emily Benson and George Kelly and The Associated Press contributed to this report. Contact Lisa M. Krieger at 650-492-4098. Follow her at [Twitter.com/LisaMKrieger](https://twitter.com/LisaMKrieger) and [Facebook.com/LisaMKrieger](https://facebook.com/LisaMKrieger).