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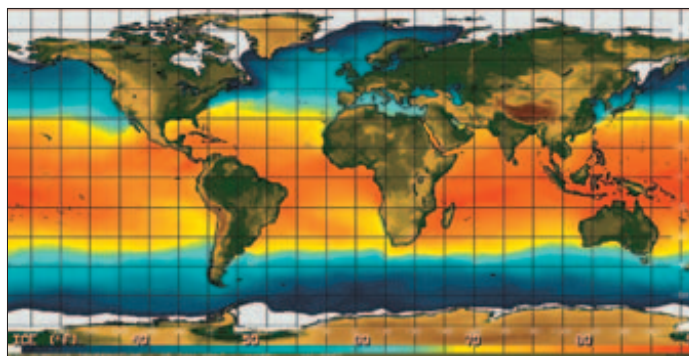
El Niño losing steam

By WILLIE VOGT

THERE'S little chance you didn't hear over the last few months about the weather phenomenon El Niño; but as winter turns toward

spring, the talk is about its demise.

"According to the Climate Prediction Center, El Niño is past its peak and will decline into May," says Christy Carlson, climatologist, High Plains Regional Climate Center, Lincoln, Neb. "There's



CHANGE IN WEATHER: Sea surface temperatures have their share of impact on local weather. This look at those temperatures in late January give you a good idea of current conditions; however, the Pacific was cooling by this time. Check out the animation Web site listed with this story. (Photo courtesy of the Space Science and Engineering Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.)

still a greater chance that the eastern two-thirds of the country will see warmer-than-normal temperatures into spring." For many, in a winter where ice storms pounded Texas and Oklahoma, and Colorado residents found themselves shoveling record snows, El Niño didn't bring expected warmer-than-normal weather.

Weak pattern, short life

Experts who follow plenty of weather models see this weak El Niño running a near-normal course. "The average length of a strong El Niño is about 14 months and can run as long as 18 months," says Dale Mohler, senior meteorologist at AccuWeather. "A weak El Niño can last as little as three to four months, and usually lasts about five to six, so this latest one is within the pattern."

As El Niño withers, prognosticators start to look forward to see what may happen next. "An end to an El Niño does not automatically bring a La Niña," Mohler says. The sea surface pattern appears to be moving toward a neutral situation, which can last several months, he says.

Joel Widenor, manager of CropCast Services, a private weather forecaster that provides weather information to industry newsletter *Farm Futures Daily*, concurs with Mohler.

Models show that by March the system will be much weaker and enter into that neutral phase. As for La Niña, Widenor is keeping watch on more than a dozen weather models. "Two of our models have indicated a La Niña pattern, but it's too early to say," he notes.

For farmers, the best news is that a neutral El Niño pattern will bring little influence to weather this summer. But El Niño isn't the only weather pattern that can impact conditions. For example, changes in the jet stream of the North Pacific brought a hefty dose of cold air into the Upper Midwest in early February and that wasn't impacted by El Niño.

For a look at the changing Pacific water temperatures, see www.cdc.noaa.gov/map/clim/sst_olr/olr_anim.shtml, created by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration.

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