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ENVIRONMENT

El Niño could make 2007 the hottest year

Scientists predicted that the global temperature this year will likely surpass the long-term average by the widest margin in recorded history.

By Raphael G. Satter

Associated Press

LONDON - Deepening drought in Australia. Stronger typhoons in Asia. Floods in Latin America. British climate scientists predict that a resurgent El Niño climate trend combined with higher levels of greenhouse gases could touch off a fresh round of ecological disasters -- and make 2007 the world's hottest year on record.

"Even a moderate [El Niño] warming event is enough to push the global temperatures over the top," said Phil Jones, director of the Climatic Research unit at the University of East Anglia.

The warmest year on record was 1998, when the average global temperature was 1.2 degrees Fahrenheit higher than the long-term average of 57 degrees.

Though such a change appears small, incremental differences can, for example, add to the ferocity of storms by evaporating more steam off the ocean.

There is a 60 percent chance that the average global temperature for 2007 will match or break the record, Britain's Meteorological Office said Thursday. The consequences of the high temperatures could be felt worldwide.

El Niño, which is now under way in the Pacific Ocean and is expected to last until May, occurs irregularly. But when it does, winters in Southeast Asia tend to become milder, summers in Australia get drier, and Pacific storms can be more intense. The U.N.'s Food Aid Organization has warned that rising temperatures could wreak agricultural havoc.

In Australia, which is struggling through its worst drought on record, the impact on farmers could be devastating. The country has already registered its smallest wheat harvest in a decade, food prices are rising and severe water restrictions have put thousands of farmers at risk of bankruptcy.

In other cases, El Niño's effects are more ambiguous. Rains linked to the phenomenon led to bumper crops in Argentina in 1998, but floods elsewhere in Latin America devastated subsistence farmers.

El Niño also can do some good. It tends to take the punch out of the Atlantic hurricane season by generating crosswinds that can rip the storms apart -- good news for orange growers and others in Florida.

"The short-term effects of global warming on crop production are very uneven," said Daniel Hillel, a researcher at Columbia University's Center for Climate Systems Research. "I warn against making definitive predictions regarding any one season's weather."

What is clear is that the cumulative effect of El Niño and global warming are taking the Earth's temperatures to record heights.

"El Niño is an independent variable," Jones said. "But the underlying trends in the warming of the Earth is almost certainly a result of the release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere."

Another more immediate effect of the rising temperatures may be political.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard is already under fire for refusing to link his country's drought to global warming. In Britain, Friends of the Earth campaign director Mike Childs said the weather service's 2007 prediction "underlined the gap between the government's rhetoric and action."

Other environmental groups said the new report added weight to the movement to control greenhouse gases.

It came a day after the weather service reported that 2006 had been Britain's warmest year since 1659, and three months after Sir Nicholas Stern, a senior government economist, estimated that the effects of climate change could eventually cost nations 5 percent to 20 percent of global gross domestic product each year.

Figures for 2006 are not yet complete, but the weather service said temperatures were high enough to rank among the top 10 hottest years on record.

"The evidence that we're doing something very dangerous with the climate is now amassing," said Campaign against Climate Change coordinator Philip Thornhill.

"We need to put the energy and priority [into climate change] that is being put into a war effort," he said. "It's a political struggle to get action done -- and these reports help."