

El Niño not a big deal, according to Lake Tahoe area public works and utility employees



January is usually when the brunt of an El Nino strikes Lake Tahoe. Photos/LTN file

By Susan Wood

Despite the weather phenomenon known as the Christ child that is expected to pack a devilish punch to the West this winter, most Lake Tahoe-area government agencies are conducting business as usual in terms of preparing for it.

Public works departments from one end of the lake to the other beef up resources for winter snow and wind compared with other seasons, but this winter could bring what climatologists and other scientists refer to as a Godzilla El Niño. The weather phenomenon is characterized as a warming of the eastern

Pacific and delivers wet storms to the California coast starting near Christmas. It often means more snow to the Sierra Nevada, but may translate to rain given the warmer air temperatures to match the ocean mercury. The large El Niños in 1982-83 and 1997-98 brought flooding (including at the Reno Tahoe International Airport), landslides and huge snow loads for residents, motorists and utility companies to deal with.

With that, Tahoe residents may hope the public agencies and utility companies are as confident about handling El Niño-driven storms as the weather forecasters and climatologists are about it bringing major weather events.



Caltrans crews in December 2010 work on a flooding issue along Highway 89.

Latitude wise, Lake Tahoe remains at the cusp of wet versus dry, as is the case with all El Niños years. What might be different in what we're seeing in recent years are the overall effects of climate change – which has shown to bring extreme weather events. The other unknown may revolve around California coming off an unprecedented four-year drought. Dry ground and heavy, sudden rainfall could turn into flooding in some areas.

With that, sand bags will be available for residents at stations on Rufus Allen Boulevard and Ruby Way through the

city of South Lake Tahoe – the one government agency with some winter prep measures that are substantive this year compared to others.

Much of what the city's Public Works Department is doing for the possibility of heavy snow or other precipitation comes in either a warning or behind the scenes efforts.

"What we want people to know is we can't clear all streets immediately, but we'll certainly try. If a big storm from El Niño produces the mother of a storm, chances are we're not going to get to residential areas as fast," Assistant Public Works Director Jim Marino told *Lake Tahoe News*. "We might go through and do a single pass."

During these times, the city will focus on the major thoroughfares such as Al Tahoe Boulevard, Pioneer Trail and Tenth Street in its eight zones. It has a dozen graders at its disposal, placing four in storage because the harsh winter takes its toll on the machines.

"We're really not doing anything out of the ordinary. I don't project any changes (to what the city is doing) –just education," Marino said.

He has a point. What's new is the city is launching a web portal in which residents may report a public works-related issue in their neighborhood. For example, citizens may report online water drainage or snow removal issues at the foot of their driveways. An investigator will respond to the service request. From that, a work order is developed and tracked through email so the homeowner or stakeholder may see the progress of fixing the issue.



Some South Lake Tahoe streets have drainage issues every winter.

The other new measure for city snow removal involves fun and access – as in clearing the bike paths along Highway 50 and Al Tahoe Boulevard.

Fun and frolic aside, it's still "business as usual" in preparing for winter for El Dorado County, according to Community Development Deputy Director Don Spear. The county's snow removal equipment is ready and "on line for any storm that comes our way," he added. Backhoes and culvert cleaning machines are also at the county's disposal.

"We have hired extra help for snow removal in the Tahoe basin as we always do every year," Spear said.

Douglas County maintains there's limited responsibility for its public works-community development teams in the Tahoe basin. Private contractors plow county-maintained roads.

"While we have no set policies for these roads, snow plowing is provided as needed in response to weather and road conditions. The general rule is that the roads are plowed when 2 inches of snow are accumulated," said Carl Ruschmeyer, who manages the road system in the Nevada county.

Placer County will bolster its roads with sand and salt, but nothing out of the ordinary.

“It’s not so different than what we’ve done in years past,” said Kevin Tabor, who manages the public works for the county along Tahoe’s West Shore. “(This is) because every winter has the possibility of being a bad winter.”

The states managing the roads relative to Lake Tahoe have put out their regular winter driving messages with a few added measures.

Like every year, the Nevada Department of Transportation started its winter preparations in August by readying more than 80 snowplows and other pieces of snow and ice equipment. More than 32,000 cubic yards of salt and sand have been stockpiled in the area.

The sand is combined with salt and wetted with brine (a water-salt solution) to create more dense sand that “helps reduce how quickly the ice forms and sticks to the road,” NDOT Assistant District Engineer for Maintenance Mike Fuess explained.

And although Caltrans officials admit El Niño “predictions do come to fruition,” the local district claims it “will be ready for any rain, sleet or snow coming our way.”

As usual for pre-winter prep, trucks have been converted to sanders and snowplows, loaders, graders, rotary blowers and tow trucks are at the district’s disposal. Drainage and culverts have been cleared and inspected. Sand, salt and brine have been stocked up. This year, more than 100 independent contract chain installers are signed up, and Caltrans seasonal workers have been hired.

“Our maintenance forces will be ready for any weather conditions this winter,” Andrew Brandt, deputy director of maintenance and traffic operations for the district, told *Lake*

Tahoe News. "Our winter operation plans are in place to address everything from flooding on our valley highways to heavy snow on the Sierra roadways."

Caltrans has also been busy replacing and installing new snow stakes along mountain highways, cleaning culverts and drainage ditches and trimming trees.

The latter represents a major concern every winter for utility companies like Liberty Energy, which services the California side of Lake Tahoe with electrical power.

"We've spent millions over the last four years trimming. We can't eliminate all trees, but we've done what we can do," spokesman Randy Kelly said. "We don't know what this winter will bring. There's been a lot of talk."

There's no beefing up of staff this year, but Liberty Energy is part of a mutual assistance network with other energy providers that share resources if one particular area is hard hit. Last year, wind storms created havoc in December and February.

"Wind is our biggest problem, but snow can be," Kelly added. He used an example in which motorists have the potential of sliding into power poles.



Wet storms often
cause trees to fall
onto structures or
across power lines.

Nevada Energy representatives have indicated the utility company servicing the electrical needs across the border that it plans to do nothing out of the ordinary compared to other winters.

“We’re always looking at the weather,” spokeswoman Katie Nannini said. “A big storm can happen no matter what the predictions are.”

And even if many agencies are conducting business as usual in reaction to extraordinary predictions about this winter, residents might not be judging from the reaction of some roofing companies on the South Shore.

Three local roofing companies’ answering machines were jammed with messages declaring they’re not accepting any more jobs because they’re too booked up.

“We’ve seen an uptick in business due to the forecast of El Niño,” Chris Marchesseault of AAA Roofing told *Lake Tahoe News*.

A few Sierra Nevada organizations have some concerns about what happens at the ground level.

The League to Save Lake Tahoe shared its most notable concern – lake clarity.

“A stormier winter would mean more stormwater runoff pouring through storm drains and into the lake. So if we get more storms, we’ll be spending extra time working with local jurisdictions and our volunteer pipe keepers to figure out which pipes are bringing the most pollution into the lake,” League Natural Resources Manager Zack Bradford told Lake Tahoe

News.

The League manages a tour de force of volunteers who monitor water and debris buildup at drains and pipes. At a recent honorary volunteer dinner, the League hinted to its people to be at a heightened state of alert this year if El Niño materializes like some of the forecasts.

Stormwater managers in particular have more concern than perhaps most agency representatives because it encompasses their jobs.

Russ Wigart, who heads El Dorado County's stormwater program, has recently expressed concern about a 100-year storm meaning 100-year runoff.

Ditto from Placer County's water runoff specialist Andy Fecko, who recently deemed El Niño and heavy precipitation as "disastrous" in the Sacramento Bee in respect to West Slope concerns.

And for the feds, their main concern on the West Slope of El Dorado County is the King Fire burn area. Of the 90,000 acres engulfed, the U.S. Forest Service owns two-thirds. That span has Eldorado National Forest officials concerned of safety issues if heavy rainfall causes mudslides.

"The first year after the fire we expanded our capacity of handling erosion and channeling debris under the road," Forest Service spokeswoman Jennifer Chapman said. She added the heli mulching as another measure on the steep slopes of where the fire burned in particular in the Brush Creek Reservoir and along 11 Pines Road.

"The main message to the public is anybody driving through the King Fire area should be particularly aware if it's raining," she said.

And with the early winter starting, the Forest Service has

noted that avalanches have already occurred in the Carson Pass area because of the sporadic snow-rain combination as the Sierra Avalanche Center has reported.

“These things make the snow unstable,” Chapman said.