El Nino weakens a tad

By Seth Borenstein, AP

Meteorologists see signs that the super El Nino is weakening ever so slightly, but they caution months will pass before people in the Americas will feel it.

The World Meteorological Organization said Thursday that El Nino has passed its peak based on specific temperature, wind, and atmospheric pressure conditions.

That's technically true, but Michelle L'Heureux, lead El Nino forecaster for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Climate Prediction Center, said there's a few months lag time before the changes affect the Americas.
El Nino is the occasional but natural warming of the central tropical Pacific which, along with changes in the atmosphere, alters weather patterns worldwide. It often brings more rain to California and parts of the U.S. West and South, warms temperatures globally a bit, and causes droughts elsewhere in the world.

In December and January, El Nino measurements showed it tied 1997-1998 for the strongest since records started being kept in 1950.

"It's still strong, but it has reached a peak value and it's starting its decline," said University of Oklahoma meteorology professor Jason Furtado. "It's still there; it's not like we don't have El Nino anymore. We can still expect (El Nino) like conditions in March and April and even into May, as well."

Mike Halpert, deputy director of the climate prediction center, said this El Nino hasn't brought drought-struck California as much moisture as previous strong El Ninos, but there are still two months to go to get significant rainfall.

With El Nino still kicking, NOAA forecast a spring that’s wetter than normal throughout the South, much of the West and part of the East. Only the Great Lakes region and Pacific Northwest are forecast to be dry. It also predicts warmer than usual weather along the entire West Coast and most of the country north of Colorado, Missouri and Tennessee, with only Texas, parts of Oklahoma and New Mexico cooler than normal.

The International Research Institute at Columbia University forecast that once this El Nino fades, there’s a 50 percent chance it will be followed directly by El Nino’s flip side, a La Nina. La Nina often means droughts in parts of the Great Plains and Southwest with more rain in the Northwest. La Ninas often mean warmer winters in the Southeast and cooler winters in the Northwest.