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A person shovels snow outside Rome Grocery near Bellingham, Wash., on Tuesday morning. As heavy snow, freezing rain and sleet have disrupted travel across the Pacific Northwest in the days leading up to Christmas, the S.C. State Climatology Office is predicting a potentially cold and dry winter across the Southeast.

Frigid winter on the horizon?

State climatology office releases weather outlook

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THE JOURNAL

COLUMBIA — The Southeast could be in for a cold, dry winter this year, thanks to La Niña.

Earlier this month, the S.C. State Climatology

Office released its winter outlook, which predicted a cold December and January followed by a warm February.

La Niña, which has been in force since fall

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of 2020, is forecast to weaken over the next six weeks, nearing normal conditions by February or March, the outlook said.

Severe weather liaison Frank Strait said his “gut feeling” is that this winter won’t be like the past two.



Strait

He said the risk of a winter storm is highest between Christmas and mid-January, but below-average precipitation will help lower the

likelihood of storms.

Strait said he’s watching La Niña’s behavior for “hints of what to expect.”

If it fades as predicted, this winter will have weather similar to the past two years, he said. If it holds strong, however, the winter will start cold and end warm, with the temperature flip happening in late January to early February.

“Either way, February is likely to be warm, January near average or colder than average,” Strait said.

WHAT IS LA NIÑA?

El Niño and La Niña are opposing weather phenomena that affect the Pacific trade winds. Episodes happen every two to seven years and usually last nine to 12 months, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), but sometimes last for years.

Normally, Pacific trade winds blow west along the equator, taking warm water from South America toward Asia, and cold water

WINTER: 'Really serious cold'

rises from the depths of the ocean to replace it, according to NOAA. But during La Niña events, trade winds are even stronger than usual and push more warm water toward Asia, increasing the cold water off the west coast of the Americas. The cold waters, in turn, push the jet stream farther north, which brings warm and dry conditions to the southern United States.

CONCERNS

The climatology office's presentation modeled past La Niña "triple dip" winters, when the event lasted for three years in a row. The winters of 1975-76 and 2000-01 both saw precipitation drop in the Southeast by as many as 4 inches below average, whereas a typical La Niña winter might only dry things up by an inch.

Strait expressed concerns about early severe thunderstorms and tornadoes, but said in past triple dip situations, those storms have mostly happened in Gulf states from Texas to Alabama.

However, a dry winter could also mean a dry — and probably hot — spring and summer, according

to the outlook, so ongoing drought conditions in the Upstate and Catawba River area could worsen over the next six to nine months, Strait said.

Though the temperatures during the 1975-76 and 2000-01 winters varied drastically in severity, both years South Carolina trended colder than average for the first two months and then warmed up significantly in February. With the Golden Corner forecasted to see lows in the teens over Christmas weekend, those trends seem likely to repeat.

POWER PROBLEMS?

There's also some concern about electricity prices and availability. Jimmy Bagley, who represents Rock Hill on the Piedmont Municipal Power Agency board, gave the board a heads-up at its meeting Thursday.

"They're thinking there are going to be some serious power concerns in parts of the country," he said. "I wanted to give you that as a heads-up. Gas prices are probably going to go up again."

Bagley referenced the other two "triple dip" years and said if this year

follows the same trend, people can expect some "really serious cold."

"I share that just to say there are a bunch of people a lot smarter than I am looking at this stuff all the time and tracking that stuff, and they're saying plan on a bad winter — particularly in South Carolina," he said. "Might be something to look out

for as we're all planning"

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