

El Nino loses sting as surprise rains prove a double-edged sword

BRENDAN O'KEEFE

Warm seas to our west and south-east have taken the sting out of one of the strongest El Ninos on record as somewhat unexpected rain has fallen on the eastern third of the country.

Bureau of Meteorology manager of climate prediction services Andrew Watkins told *The Australian* that the surface waters of the Indian Ocean south of the tropics had recorded the warmest month on record in October.

"That tends to have a wetting influence on Australia," Dr Watkins said. "It feeds in more moisture and changes where the jet stream is, which guides the weather systems, from the south up to the continent. There is a bit more moisture feeding in from the west."

"It's not a classic El Nino situation but you would never rule it out during an El Nino."

Low-pressure systems were also picking up moisture from the warm East Australian Current, Dr Watkins said.

"Big blobs of warm water can

influence the climate locally and further afield."

It was not uncommon for rain to fall even during a strong El Nino: "It's not like an El Nino stops the weather from happening but it reduces the odds and we saw that in September and October. In early November we've seen a bit more of these systems that enable thunderstorms to crop up."

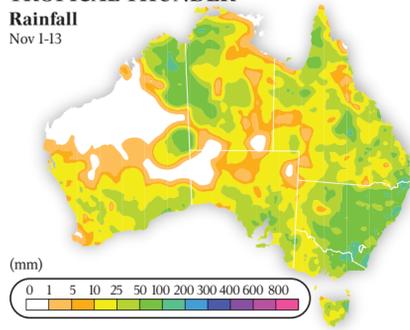
When northern NSW farmer Edward Colless received 51mm of rain last week, it proved something of a double-edged sword. It put moisture in his soil but it also fed weeds that have sprung up on paddocks fallow since 2012 because of drought. Removing the weeds is an extra cost.

For Mr Colless, who works 9300ha south of Walgett, the rain typifies a problem he and others in the region have with forecasts that are supposed to help. Partly on the promise of a wet 2013, he bought an additional property, only to be left helpless as another dry year rolled on. "It was a sub-optimal decision," he said.

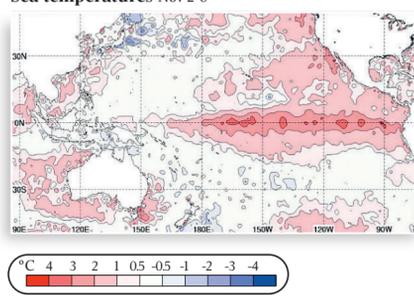
"(Forecasters') income doesn't stop when they get it wrong. They

TROPICAL THUNDER

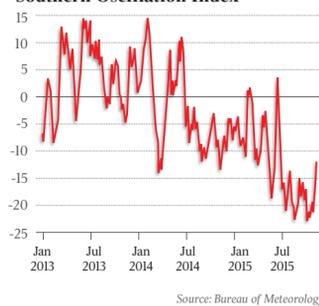
Rainfall
Nov 1-13



Sea temperatures Nov 2-8



Southern Oscillation Index



Source: Bureau of Meteorology

keep leveraging money out of the government on the basis that if they can improve their forecasts, it will give farmers the ability to better manage drought.

"Unseasonal warming in the southern Indian Ocean is continuing to feed these late winter rain fronts."

"It's just another variation that forecasters have not factored in."

In the next week, the bureau expects falls of between 10mm and 100mm east of an arc from the Gulf of Carpentaria to Melbourne, a region normally left gasping for rain during an El Niño.

Parts of central and northwest Queensland, most of the Murray-Darling Basin, the eastern half of South Australia and patches of the West Australian interior have al-

ready exceeded their November average rainfall, but long-term deficiencies persist.

Dr Watkins said although recent dumps in central Queensland were "fantastic", the region remained "three wet seasons behind... They need a whole wet season of good rain but models suggest there is not a strong chance of that."

The situation was similar in southeastern South Australia and western Victoria.

"Rainfall there (this month) has been up to 80mm, but the past 16 months has been a very dry time there and they are about 300mm behind over 16 months."

"They would need six to eight times the normal November rainfall to catch up," Dr Watkins said.

The Bushfire and Natural Hazards Co-operative Research Centre this week updated its summer bushfire outlook for southern Australia after what it said was an "exceptionally dry" spring with record temperatures.

The centre says bushfire risk is higher than normal in northern and eastern Tasmania, the Kimberley, central and southwest

Western Australia and east and south of a line from just south of Mackay to Port Augusta, excluding far eastern Victoria.

In the Pacific, the El Niño remained strong. Sea surface temperatures in the eastern and central equatorial region are up to 3C above normal, which has the effect of drawing moisture away from the cooler western Pacific.

The latest value of the Southern Oscillation Index, a comparison of air pressure between Darwin and Tahiti, is -13.2 after dipping to about -23 last month. Values below -7 indicate El Niño.

The El Niño was expected to break down in the first quarter of next year, Dr Watkins said. The Indian Ocean Dipole was in a strongly positive phase, meaning eastern waters off Indonesia were cooler than normal and the west was warmer: the Arabian Sea this month has spawned two cyclones, Chapala and Megh.

The World Meteorological Organisation said cyclones were "extremely rare" over the Arabian Peninsula and two close together was "absolutely extraordinary".

Six Islamic schools face freeze on funds

LEO SHANAHAN

The federal government is threatening to freeze funding for six Muslim schools after an audit found serious governance issues at colleges run by the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils.

Following an audit announced in June, operators of the schools were yesterday issued with "non-compliance" notices warning them they are failing to comply with financial management and government requirements of the Australian Education Act.

The move follows a series of scandals at AFIC-managed schools raising concerns about governance, financial mismanagement and teaching standards.

It comes as Australia's largest Muslim school, Malek Fahd in Sydney's southwest, seeks to recover financially amid warnings, revealed in *The Australian* that it might be trading while insolvent after using recurrent funding — given to the school for education — towards building projects.

The *Weekend Australian* understands contingency plans have been made by the NSW Education Department for the closure of the school of 2200 students.

However, it is understood the department and the state's Board of Studies — which has extended the school's registration only until the end of 2016 — would be loath to close the school because of the number of students who would need relocating.

One option being considered is continuing funding, with a government-approved administrator installed to manage the school's finances.

The six AFIC schools that will have to comply with the notices are Malek Fahd, Islamic College of Brisbane, Islamic College of Melbourne, Islamic College of

South Australia, Islamic School of Canberra and Langford Islamic College in Western Australia. They have 28 days to show how they will comply or face a commonwealth funding freeze.

The South Australian college last night said in a statement it intended to comply fully.

"We accept without reservation the requirements set out under the Education Act and are confident that we will satisfy all of the commonwealth's requirements," said acting principal Lynda MacLeod.

Malek Fahd previously repaid \$9 million to the NSW government after *The Australian* revealed funding was being handed back to AFIC as inflated rent and "management fees".

The South Australian and Brisbane Islamic colleges also face state government and police investigations into their finances.

Federal Education Minister Simon Birmingham said the formal notifications followed the department review that identified concerns over the governance, financial and accountability arrangements of the schools. "I am committed to ensuring that all school authorities meet the requirements of the Education Act to ensure that our taxpayer dollar and any private investment by parents is being spent as intended to benefit Australian students," he said.

Malek Fahd receives about \$20m a year from state and federal governments, making up 80 per cent of the school's funding. In 2013, the latest available data, AFIC schools received \$42m from state and federal governments. This year, the amount is likely to be at least \$45m.

AFIC schools generally receive the highest level of government assistance because of the number of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

NBN hook-up sparks fear of missing fire alerts



WILL RUSSELL

Balingup resident Peta Townsing says with an extreme bushfire season approaching, she can no longer get local AM radio reception

EXCLUSIVE

ANDREW BURRELL

Residents of some bushfire-prone areas who have connected to the NBN could face an unforeseen and dangerous side-effect: interference to their local ABC radio reception that often proves critical in an emergency.

Although only a handful of cases across several states have been reported to NBN Co during the network's rollout, a regional West Australian resident has been unable to listen to AM radio since she had the NBN installed more than four months ago.

Retired public servant Peta Townsing, who lives in the town of Balingup, 240km south of Perth, said she was happy to receive faster internet speeds but was concerned she would be unable to receive alerts from her local ABC station during the upcoming bushfire season.

The state's Department of Fire and Emergency Services recommends residents in bushfire-prone areas have a battery-powered portable radio to listen to emergency alerts because local ABC radio station may be their only means of information.

Ms Townsing said NBN technicians had been unable to fix the problem despite repeated

attempts, and she was concerned the issue would affect more people as the NBN was rolled out in other rural areas.

She said she was dismayed by the "bureaucracy" of dealing with NBN Co.

"We are facing an extremely high bushfire risk," she said. "We need a solution and we need it soon."

"Having a properly working AM radio that can work with or without a power supply is an integral part of our bushfire survival plan."

The interference to AM radio appears to be caused by the NBN's use of fixed wireless broadband, which uses radio signals, in

rural areas. These areas often have a weak AM radio signal that is prone to interference.

An NBN spokesman said the company was working with Ms Townsing to fix the problem.

"While the NBN equipment at this property meets all technical requirements and specifications, it has been found to be partially contributing to the AM radio interference, though testing has revealed the interference remains with our equipment turned off," she said.

"We are working with the resident to identify other sources of interference in the home which are affecting her service, including the existing AM radio station

frequency and signal. This issue is not widespread and is very much isolated."

Ms Townsing denied there was interference to her AM radio reception with NBN turned off. "If I switch off the NBN, the radio is fine," she said.

In fact sheets prepared for local communities, NBN Co says its fixed wireless network facilities "will not cause signal interference with television or radio reception, mobile network services, or with electronics in the home".

"NBN Co is obliged by the operating conditions of our radio licence not to interfere with other radio communications systems," it says.

'Gang rape ringleader' asks for protection

KATHERINE TOWERS

The alleged ringleader of a gang of relatives who allegedly abducted and raped a 14-year-old girl in Geelong has asked to be placed in protective custody.

Brothers Kevin Andrew Wild, 28, and Allan Mark Wild, 29, appeared in the Melbourne Magistrate's Court yesterday on charges of rape and abduction, a day after their younger relative Rowan Gavin Wild was granted bail on the same charges.

Another relative, Brodie Mark Wild, 20, has been extradited from Queensland on the same charges and has been remanded in custody and will apply for bail next week.

A lawyer for Kevin Wild, Steve Parker, told the court his client had been held in the general prison population since being charged and was seeking protective custody.

The brothers, both with beards and appearing calm, did not seek bail and were remanded to appear in February for a committal mention.

Each of the four has been charged with one count of abduction and one of rape over the assaults that occurred at two locations in the Geelong suburb of St Albans Park on November 1.

The court has previously heard Kevin Wild was the ringleader of the attack in which a girl was allegedly abducted and gang-raped by the relatives.

The court was told the victim had left a party with a 16-year-old male friend and walked to a local park, where she was abducted by the men, taken to a house and raped repeatedly.

The victim's male friend said he pleaded with the men to leave the girl alone but was attacked, and returned to the party to seek help.

It was alleged that before the girl was taken, her friend had yelled at the men to leave her alone because "she's only 14".

One of the men allegedly responded: "She's 18, it's all good."

She was allegedly dropped back at the park and sought help.

McMurdo follows wife on to appeals bench

SARAH ELKS
QUEENSLAND POLITICAL REPORTER

The Queensland government has appointed to the state's highest court Philip McMurdo, who will share the bench with his wife, Margaret.

In long-awaited appointments announced yesterday, judge Philip McMurdo will fill the vacancy on the Court of Appeal left by Catherine Holmes, who was made Chief Justice in September.

Chief Justice Holmes's ascension ended months of infighting in the state's judiciary, sparked by the appointment of former chief justice Tim Carmody, who was hand-picked by then-premier Campbell Newman to be the state's top judge. He previously was chief magistrate.

Justice McMurdo will be elevated from the Supreme Court, where he has sat since 2003.

Margaret McMurdo has been the state's second-most powerful judge since she became the first Australian woman to be appointed Court of Appeal president in 1998. Both originally were appointed to the bench by Labor governments.

The Attorney-General, Yvette D'Ath, said the appointment recognised Justice McMurdo's extensive and broad experience. "He is held in high regard across the profession and judiciary and I know he will be an excellent addition to the court."

Michael Roderick Byrne QC was named Director of Public Prosecutions. He had been acting in the role since June, when former DPP Tony Moynihan became a District Court judge.

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