

Season History 1997 - 98

El Nino

Much hype regarding the El Nino, long range forecasts preceded the first winter snows by several months. Unfortunately, El Nino was widely misunderstood by the media, and consequently by the public. The media's simplistic reporting never seemed to grasp that the effects of El Nino varied dramatically depending on which part of the country you were talking about. In a typical El Nino year, the northern U.S. is usually dry, the California coast and the southern U.S. is usually wet and northern Utah is usually left somewhere in the middle. That fact seems easy enough to explain, but the popular media almost never mentioned it, and consequently the public ended up with all kinds of crazy ideas.

Depending on which article you read on which day, the winter could be wet or dry, warm or cold, good or catastrophic. Of course all of these predictions were correct, but it depended on which part of the country you were talking about. The "good versus bad" viewpoint could also vary according to your orientation. Is your interest winter sports or growing cotton?

In hindsight, we were impressed by how well the predictions turned out—that is the National Weather Service predictions, not the media spin. The forecast for northern Utah was for a split-flow pattern with an active southern storm track resulting in a dry early season with a wet spring, finishing with an above average, but not record, snow pack. And that's exactly what happened.