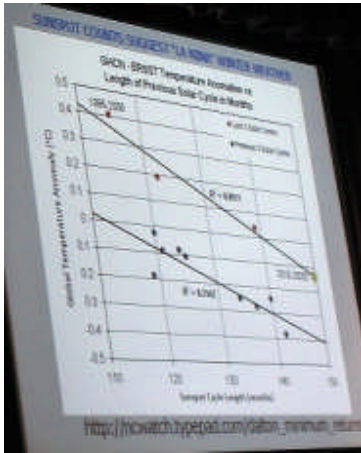


The following is an article from the November 2009 Sellwood Bee. If you think it is frustrating to figure out what the weather has in store for us ... read what the experts think.

The upcoming winter...? A difference of opinion

By Eric Norberg

The Bee, Nov 4, 2009



This chart, offered by CRITFC Hydrologist and Meteorologist Kyle Dittmer, shows a continued downtrend in sunspots from the current extended minimum, leading him to expect a snowier winter in the Portland area than any other forecaster making predictions from the lectern at the OMSI auditorium on October 17th.

Eric Norberg / THE BEE

For the 17th year – and its 14th at OMSI – the Oregon branch of the American Meteorological Society held its special, open-to-the-public “What Will the Winter Be Like?” meeting on

Saturday, October 17th.

As it began, a forecast rainstorm had been a day late in arriving, and the sun was out.

Before the two hours had passed, however, a third of an inch of rain had fallen in Inner Southeast Portland, lightning had struck here and there around the Portland area, and power lines were down in some spots. As the meeting progressed in the OMSI auditorium, the weather experts periodically flashed the current radar image on the screen, saw their rainy forecast fulfill itself, and seemed cheered.

The first step in each of these annual get-togethers is a review of the past winter, in light of the forecasts made a year ago. Mark Nelson, Chief Meteorologist at KPTV-12, presents these reports in lighthearted fashion, with photographs and charts. And, this bunch of forecasters didn't do badly a year ago; most of those speaking had forecast multiple snow events, although none had foreseen that these would set all-time snow records for Portland in late December.

So, what did they think about our upcoming winter this year?

They were not really in close agreement with each other this time, so some will definitely be seen as wrong at next October's meeting.

The difference of opinion this year rested on whether an "El Nino" condition is in progress in the western Pacific Ocean; each forecaster used or emphasized different indicators in forming their long-range forecasts. All used historical data of various sorts to do it, since today's computer weather models on which daily forecasts are made do not project reliably more than a week out at most.

Steve Pierce, statistician for the Oregon AMS chapter, began the program with a statistical analysis of past Portland weather patterns, which suggested to him that the winter of 2009-2010 could be a "significantly snowy winter – 20 or more inches".

Tyree Wilde of the National Weather Service at Portland Airport spoke next, proclaiming this unequivocally to be an "El Nino year", and forecasting that our winter should be warmer and dryer than usual, although stormy anomalies could certainly occur, as they did in what he identified as the similar year of 2006. He expected little or no snow.

George Taylor, the popular weather consultant who previously served as the State Climatologist at Oregon State University, and this year speaking by phone line from a weather convention in Corvallis, contended that the current "El Nino" had peaked and started to fade last summer – but he agreed with Wilde that 2006 was a good analogue year, and thus he expects any snow to occur early – perhaps in November – with the weather turning dry in December, and with little snow this winter in the Portland area.

Pete Parsons, jovial former KOIN-TV-6 meteorologist, and now the forecaster for the Oregon Department of Agriculture, explained that using his indicators, he considered the winter of 1963 to be the closest analogue to this winter – with an unconventional "El Nino" in progress – and he expects a dryer than normal November and December, with January being very wet, accompanied by mountain snow. However, he too said he expected a relatively warm winter this winter, with little significant snow in Portland.

Breaking sharply with this consensus was Kyle Dittmer, forecaster for the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, and former President of the local AMS chapter. His primary long-range weather indicator is

sunspot activity trends, which have been at an extremely low level for an unusually long period of time, he said.

Consequently, unlike others who spoke, Dittmer revealed that he was expecting this to be a "La Nina" winter – agreeing with Taylor that the current "El Nino" peaked in July, but deciding that it is already turning negative, towards "La Nina" conditions. As a result, his forecast was for up to SIX snow events in the Portland area and the Willamette Valley – with 2"-3" accumulation in each one – between December and February.

So, depending upon whose forecasting tools you most accept – sea temperatures, pressure and temperature ratios, the Pacific Decadal Oscillator, the El Nino Southern Oscillation, or sunspot counts – this may be an interesting winter, or it may not.

At this time next year, we'll know for sure.