

Climate experts present findings on drought

By [SCOTT McMILLION](#), Chronicle Staff Writer

CHICO HOT SPRINGS -- Drought shows no sign of easing in the Northwestern United States.

In fact, the dry times that have plagued the American Southwest appear to be moving north.

Those are some of the findings presented at a three-day gathering of climate experts here this week.

For the past six or seven years, "drought has migrated around the West," said Kelly Redmond, of the Desert Research Institute in Reno, Nev. "This year, it's going north."

Drought in Montana often is related to the El Nino, which is a warm-water current in the Pacific Ocean that affects the weather for great distances. However, this year's El Nino is weak, but the reaction in the American West is similar to what happens when El Nino is strong. This has experts puzzled.

"It looks like an El Nino, but it doesn't smell like an El Nino," Redmond said Tuesday evening in opening remarks to about 125 people.

Southwest Montana's drought is as bad as it's been since the dust bowl years, he said. The Billings area has lost 1.5 years worth of precipitation over the past six years.

It's likely to get worse, he said.

"I can't see any way but down for this whole area," the Belgrade native said.

Meanwhile, Las Vegas, Nev., is having the wettest winter on record and mudslides are carrying away parts of California. Brian Head, in southern Utah, has more snow than Washington's Mount Rainier.

Yellowstone National Park, the headwaters for three major river systems, is having its sixth year in a row of low snowpack, he added.

He was addressing MTNCLIM 2005, a gathering of scientists

sponsored by the Consortium for Integrated Climate Research in Western Mountains.

The group is looking at the impacts of climate change, and various ways to chart those impacts.

"A warming of only a few degrees has major implications for alpine regions," according to the group's introductory materials.

Warming affects water supply, the "die-back" of vast forest tracts due to insect infestations, wildfire and its impacts on air quality and private and public property, plus the reduction of plant and animal species.

Wet and dry periods run in cycles, and some researchers rely on the study of tree rings to evaluate those cycles. Those studies show the ongoing drought is among the worst in 500 years in parts of the country.

Drought also has social and political implications.

Stephen Gray, of the U.S. Geological Survey, noted that when several Colorado River states divided up that stream's waters, they did so during a wet cycle early in the last century, working under an assumption that the times were normal.

Now, it appears much of the West is entering a dry cycle and states may have to make do with less water, even though "more people and more taps" create more demand.

His warning came despite this winter's abundant storms to the south.

"Don't let a little wet weather fool you," he cautioned.

The conference continues through Friday.

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