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Wetter, cooler winter headed to Georgia

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Athens, Ga. - There is a high likelihood that Georgia's winter will be wetter and cooler than normal.

The exception is the north Georgia mountain region, which is near the transition from wetter-than-normal conditions to the south and drier-than-normal conditions to the north. Temperatures in the mountains will likely be below normal.

With soils already near saturation from September and October rains, the risk of flooding is expected to remain higher than normal through the winter.

The ocean-atmosphere system is currently in the El Niño pattern. This pattern is expected to persist through the winter. Following an El Niño winter, it is not unusual for a drier-than-normal trend in spring.

El Niño's influence is especially strong in the southern two-thirds of the state. The mountainous region of north Georgia and middle and east Tennessee is a transition zone. Depending on where the transition zone occurs this winter, the mountains will experience drier-than-normal, near-normal or wetter-than-normal conditions.

While the outlook is for a cooler winter, this does not mean that cold arctic outbreaks are likely. The coolness is primarily caused by the increase in cloudiness. This means that the daily high temperatures tend to be cooler than normal. However, the nighttime lows have a tendency to be slightly warmer than normal because of the increase in cloudiness.

It is very rare to experience temperatures in the low teens along the coast and coastal plain during an El Niño winter. Across the piedmont, single-digit temperatures are very rare. The mountains rarely experience temperatures around zero during an El Niño winter.

Many streams that are usually at their lowest flows during October are at levels normally seen in March, which is the month

that generally has the highest flows. Since the soils are already near saturation and stream flows high, the potential for flooding this winter is higher than normal.

It is not unusual for the middle or late spring following an El Niño winter to be drier than normal. Thus, water managers are going to have a difficult time regulating reservoirs for an expected wet winter, knowing that from the middle of spring onward there is a good chance Georgia will experience drier-than-normal conditions.

(David Emory Stooksbury is the state climatologist and a professor of engineering and atmospheric sciences in the University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences.)