

THE NATION



By Michael Okoniewski, AP

Snow drought: Kelly Underwood of Syracuse, N.Y., says the lack of snow in the area is hurting his snow-removal business.

No-snow snow surprises many across country

By Yasmin Anwar
USA TODAY

An unusual lack of snow in many of the nation's winter wonderlands is surprising climate watchers and deflating skiers who prefer natural flakes to machine-made snow.

"It's weird," said Harrison Yang, a Connecticut state climatologist who studies weather trends. "Normally around this time of year, we get snow at least once a week."

From the usually chilly hills of upstate New York to the crisp summits of California's Sierra Nevada range, snow levels are way down and temperatures positively balmy.

No measurable snow has fallen on Boston, breaking the previous record for the latest date for the season's first snow, Dec. 22, set in 1998.

Portland, Maine, had a record high temperature of 50 degrees Monday, and readings hit 60 in much of the Northeast last week.

Eastern Lake Ontario — usually the snowiest area east of the Rockies, with an average of 220 inches a year — is virtually snowless this season.

With a paltry 1.6 inches of snow, Albany, N.Y., is experiencing its least snowy winter in

50 years. Buffalo, famous for its towering drifts, has gotten just less than 14 inches, about 27 inches less than usual for this point in the season.

Though it's too early in the season to make any long-term predictions (significant snow is supposed to fall on the Northeast later this week), climate watchers can't help being a little concerned.

"We're way below normal, and that's going to have repercussions for the ski industry and farmers," Vermont State Climatologist Lesley-Ann Dupigny-Giroux said.

Blame is being laid on La Niña, a weather phenomenon that cools the waters of the equatorial Pacific Ocean, altering the jet streams that steer weather systems.

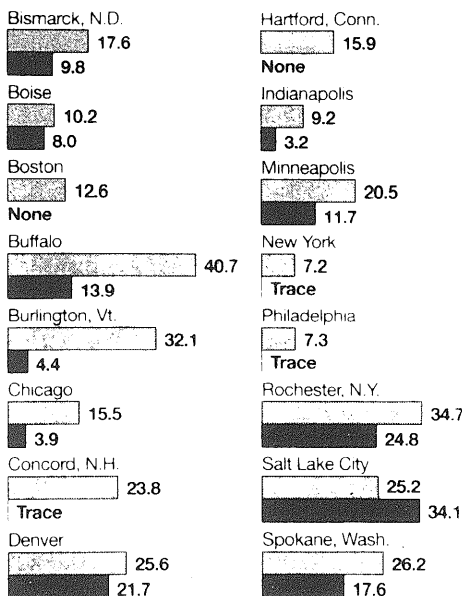
This winter, La Niña appears to have driven the major storms into the North and Northwest of the USA, said Jim Laver, deputy director of the National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center.

"It doesn't mean we won't get a good snow later on, but the chance of it getting cold and staying cold is less in a La Niña year," he said.

In California, where snow provides more than one-third of the state's water supply,

Less snowfall than average

Inches of snow in selected U.S. cities from Sept. 1 through Jan. 10: 30-year average This season



Sources: National Weather Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Climate Data Center, National Climatic Data Center.

snowfall is down significantly. At Norden, which is north of Lake Tahoe, snowfall is 49% what it usually is this time of year, said Bill Mork, a climatologist with the California Department of Water Resources.

As for the Midwest, "Illinois, southern Michigan, southern Wisconsin and all of Ohio do not have any snow cover at this point," said Michael Palecki, a regional climatologist for the National Climatic Data Center's Midwestern Climate Center.

There is a silver lining.

"With the exception of the ski resorts, most people aren't too upset about the lack of snow," New York State Climatologist Keith Eggleston said. "Especially those who have to drive to work and shovel snow."

Boston Public Works Commissioner Joseph Casazza is another who is not mourning the snowless season.

"It's very good news for public works," said Casazza, whose department has spent only \$500,000 of its \$4.5 million snow removal budget. But he has no faith in La Niña.

"Anybody who thinks this is going to be an easy winter is speaking too soon," Casazza said.

Colorado's ski industry is less thrilled with the situation.

"While the majority of the season lies ahead, the majority of generous money spending goes on over the holidays, and they did not have the best bookings this year for holiday stays," said Nolan Doesken, assistant state climatologist for Colorado, where some areas have seen only half their average snowfall amount.

Maryland's Wisp ski area, which sees 4,000 to 5,000 visitors on a good day, says zero new snow hasn't spoiled its season.

"We live on machine-made snow," said Jerry Geisler, manager of Wisp's operations. And machine-made snow is nothing to sniff at, said Rick Kahl, editor-in-chief of *Skiing* magazine in Boulder, Colo.

"For hard-core skiers, machine-made snow isn't bad at all," Kahl said.

Contributing: Wire services

Scholars de manipulation

By Jane Sutton
Reuters

MIAMI — Legal confusion surrounded the future of Elian Gonzalez on Tuesday after a Florida judge said the young Cuban shipwreck survivor should stay in Miami for now, a ruling that legal scholars say she has no authority to make.

On Monday, Miami-Dade County Circuit Judge Rosa Rodriguez awarded temporary custody of Elian to his great-uncle in Miami pending a hearing March 6 on whether he would suffer "serious and unnecessary emotional harm" if returned to his father in communist Cuba.

The ruling defied the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service's decision that Elian's father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, has custody of the 6-year-old boy and is the only person who can speak for him.

Bernard Perlmutter, director of the University of Miami's Children and Youth Law Clinic, says the ruling also violates Florida law, which says child custody rests with the natural parent unless there is clear proof the parent is unfit. No one has alleged that Gonzalez is unfit. Elian's Miami relatives say he would be harmed if returned to a communist country.

"That would be totally outside the bounds of Florida law," Perlmutter says. "We don't put governments on trial. We put parents on trial when we take children away."

University of Miami law professor David Abraham agreed: "Family custody is not predicated on the political system. The father is the father."

The case has caused political uproars in Miami, Havana and Washington, and on Tuesday it sparked protests in New York.

Elian was plucked from the ocean on Nov. 25, two days after a boat carrying him, his mother, Elizabeth Broton, and 12 other Cuban migrants capsized en route to Florida. Eleven drowned, including Elian's mother.

In the weeks since the rescue, the boy has become a sym-



Rally for Elian arrested Tues



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Florida jewelry scam trial begins

Pro golfers among clients who claim expensive losses

By Catherine Wilson

\$48,875 to make a diamond pin shaped like his shark trademark. He gave the pin to his wife, Laura, in 1996. Later, he discovered that the blue, orange, green, black and pink diamonds used in the pin had been treated with radiation to bring out

brother pose as a sheik, hired women to pose as a harem and arranged for men to play their bodyguards, Hopkins said.

When sued by fleeced customers, Hasson countersued for slander and often settled for less than the custom-

Fight