



## Western Perspective

By **JIM MOORE**

### Unusual As Usual

**T**HE last time the news media carried a Western weather story was in January when it seemed the rains wouldn't quit. Reservoirs filled beyond capacity forcing releases that caused rivers to spill over their banks, and the evacuation of both people and livestock. Ark building wasn't completely out of the question.

Then, as if on cue, the water gods turned off the spigot. While December and January saw rainfall beyond all understanding, February through September were the driest nine months in 100 years for many regions. At presstime, November appeared to be following suit. No rain and record high temperatures were recorded through the first week.

#### WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

OK, above I said the last good weather story was in January, but I forgot about El Niño. That's because that's all it's been so far—just a story. No action.

For many months now every news media in the world has carried gloom and doom stories about the impending effects of The Child. El Niño, so named for the Christ child, is first noticed about Christmastime when the surface of the Pacific Ocean significantly warms off the coast of South America. Nobody, and I mean nobody, knows what causes the phenomenon.

Throughout the summer and fall, growers have been mentally doused with accounts of the damage El Niño will wreak. Best I can make out of all of the reports is that half the world—mostly where poor people live—will suffer crop smothering drought. The rest of the world (including the West Coast) will see rainfall approaching biblical proportions.

As for my prediction, I still hold to my rule of Inverse Newspaper Headline Proportion. In simple English, that means, the larger the newspaper headline, or in this case, the more media hoopla given to a weather event, the less severe it will actually be. If my rule holds, it may not rain again in the West for five years.

Aside from the weather in the West, where nobody knows what "normal" is, the 1997 season came and went with usual alacrity. Some of the highlights include:

- Lettuce growers are jumping for joy as the market rebounded for the first time since 1995. Prices in early November were above \$20 a carton. One industry expert observed that had the market re-

mained in the doldrums, a number of growers might have been in very serious trouble or worse.

- The fresh-cut market appears to have grown past the fad stage as that industry continues to grow. As much as 30% of the lettuce grown in the Salinas Valley is devoted to the fresh cut market. At the same time, growers continue to explore different salad mixes and presentations.

- Strawberry growers, facing the specter of bad berries grown in foreign countries that are getting into the food supply, were hit with a major marketing problem. By season's end, most reported having a reasonably good year.

- As if strawberry growers didn't have enough to worry about, the United Farm Workers union spent another summer staging media events. After two seasons of such activities, no union election has been held, causing one industry source to speculate that maybe the workers do not view themselves as bad off as the union would have the world believe.

- On the fresh tomato front, the major news came in early November when Bob Meyer, owner of the King City-based Meyer Tomatoes, announced that he was pulling out of the Salinas Valley and moving his entire operation to Mexico.

Meyer, who founded his tomato business 43 years ago in King City, said headquarters will remain there, but he is giving up on growing mature greens in the Salinas Valley. Weather conditions that cause scaring and the lack of long shelflife varieties adapted for the Salinas Valley region were two of the major reasons he mentioned.

Meyer, a veteran of winter fresh produce production in mainland Mexico, said that beginning in 1999, the King City operation will be moved to Colinet in Baja's San Quintin Valley, where he and his partners will grow for the summer market. **AVG**

## Getting to Know El Niño

EL Niño, as it has come to be known, refers to the warm body of water surfacing in the Pacific that has the potential to dramatically affect weather all over the world. El Niño typically begins heating up the western Pacific around Christmastime, which led Peruvians to name the phenomenon after the Christ child more than two hundred years ago.

Some of the most destructive losses caused by El Niño occurred in the winter of 1982-83 when torrential rain and surf led to \$265 million in damages in Southern California. It is expected to hit hardest between December and March, bringing heavy rain to both the southern and western U.S. El Niño has led to many hurricanes in the West, including Hurricane Pauline that recently hit Acapulco.

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