

Wet weather snarls roads, wilts plants – isn't unusual

By Susan Wood and Kathryn Reed

Twenty-four hours after the Earth experienced its warmest day on record, Mother Nature cooked up a winter storm for the Sierra Nevada that showed the extremes climatologists and even the "Farmers Almanac" predicted last fall.

"We could have a very cool May. And if it stays this way, it will be the first one since 1998," Kelly Redmond, chief climatologist with the Western Regional Climate Center, said Monday.

Although Redmond studies El Nino weather patterns like the moderate one the Pacific Coast experienced this winter, he said he doesn't think the symptoms of the tropical weather phenomenon are still lingering.



Visibility was nil Monday heading into Tahoe on Highway 50. Photos/Kathryn Reed

"Most of those end in March," Redmond said.

The region is experiencing a series of fluctuations in temperature and storm cycles. Early May's normal freezing elevation of 10,800 feet is 800 feet lower than what is usual for Lake Tahoe. As oscillations go, April's freezing level for Lake Tahoe was 1,000 feet lower in elevation than the normal 8,700 feet. The freezing level is determined by where rain turns to snow.

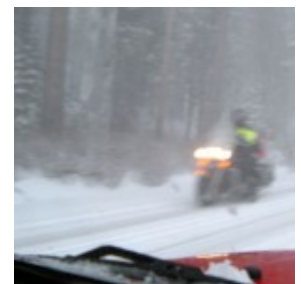
This pattern made snow more plentiful for a wider region of the Sierra Nevada and its foothills, Redmond reported.

"This is unusual. No question about it. But spring's back and forth from hot to cold is more noticeable when you're hoping for the opposite," he said, referring to the summerlike days that have sprinkled the calendar.

On Monday, Reno's high temperature was 34 degrees; Donner Summit's 23 degrees; and Incline Village came in at 26 degrees.

Horrible road conditions

The nasty weather had law enforcement and tow truck drivers scurrying to keep up with the calls. Nearly 20 motorcyclists thought it a good idea to head west over Echo Summit only to get stuck on Highway 50 at Twin Bridges.



A motorcyclist in the snow on Highway 50 on May 10.

"It's not too bright when you know what's going on with the weather," California Highway Patrol Officer Jeff Gartner said of the two-wheelers.

A pickup almost landed in the American River off of Highway 50. Another pickup farther east was pulling a sedan out of a snowbank on the north side of the two-lane road.

Highway patrol officials in California and Nevada said early Monday night no major accidents had occurred, just a lot of spinouts. They said people seem to have forgotten how to drive in the snow.

It was a whiteout on much of Highway 50 on Monday afternoon just outside of Placerville to Meyers.

South Lake Tahoe police officers were hopping as well with spinouts. A scare after school with three missing children ended happily when the Bijou Community School students were located after missing their bus.

Perennials will survive, annuals no

Even though storms like the one Monday that dumped about 4 inches of snow at lake level are not unusual, not all the plant life knows this. Daffodils and other bulbs are likely to spring back, though maybe not as straight as they were on Mother's Day.

"Snow doesn't hurt. It's the cyclical temperatures (that are bad). The wind we had (Monday) morning, then the precipitation, that turns leaves black," explained Ron Zehren of Zehren's Landscape Nursery in South Lake Tahoe. "You can't hurt a bulb. Perennials will take the cold."

It's annuals like marigolds, petunias and zinnias that shouldn't be planted until after Memorial Day.

At Perennial Landscape & Nursery in Tahoe Vista they hold off on ordering the non-frost resistant plants because of storms

like the one this week.

Rite-Aid had flowers for sale in its parking lot last week in South Tahoe. They probably didn't make it sitting on the asphalt or if people planted them.

"It's way too early for annuals. You can't fool Mother Nature," Zehren said.

Most nurseries in the basin tell customers not to plant until June – no matter if it seems like an early spring.

Zehren said the other thing people have to worry about is having plants acclimate to the area. They may be grown in the Central Valley, shipped to the Carson Valley and then put in the ground in Tahoe in a 24-hour period.

"The plant says 'get me out of here'," Zehren said of that scenario.

Climate change

Even though May snowstorms are not unusual in Tahoe, including last year, the Western United States has seen more cold spells in the last few years.

However, before labeling the planet's spring weather as a symptom of the Ice Age, look at other areas of the world to get a grip of climate change in the form of warming. There's a huge difference between global warming and localized weather.



A truck barely stops before

hitting the
American
River.

“You can’t tell the climate by looking out the window. The whole planet doesn’t work altogether in one direction,” Redmond, the climatologist, said.

Redmond warned the planet is experiencing “more pluses than minuses” in terms of temperature.

“Although it’s been very cool in our neck of the woods, 2010 has turned out to be very warm in the first four months. This one has been the warmest in 30 years of our satellite records. It may turn out to be the warmest in the last 100 years,” he said.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s average of its collective temperature readings from around the world on May 9 was 20 degrees below zero. This sounds cold, but it is a few degrees warmer than average.

Scientists have long predicted weather extremes may become more frequent with climate change.

Redmond has seen it all firsthand this year. He was attending a conference in Miami in January when the Southeast had a deep freeze – and no heaters. Last week he was visiting Boston when highs hit the mid-80s.

The word from him – prepare for anything. In Tahoe that means keeping the shovel and rake next to one another.