

Experts growing optimistic about El Niño

By Haley Branson-Potts and Rong-gong Lin II, Los Angeles Times

It's the middle of the summer, but it felt a bit like winter in the Sierra this week as a storm dumped 4 inches of hail on Interstate 80 around Donner Summit.

There was so much pea-sized ice that the California Highway Patrol on Tuesday halted traffic and called out snowplows – known as the “Sierra Snowfighters” – for help.

“It looked just like snow, a blanket of snow across all the lanes,” said Caltrans snowplower John Wheeler. “It was really weird.”

The hail storm was just the latest strange weather to hit the Sierra Nevada, influenced by the weather-changing phenomenon El Niño. For months, climate scientists have said El Niño is likely to bring more rain to Southern California this winter.

But here's the big question in a state enduring four years of severe drought: How far north will El Niño's influence roam?

The El Niño hitting the mountains of the north is critical because California's vast waterworks rely on rain and snow from the Sierra to supply farms and cities. By contrast, much of the rain that falls in Southern California ends up in the ocean.

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