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As harvest season approaches, many growers will be wondering what to expect. Rain is the obvious culprit to affect harvesting. A national rain day (rain more than 1mm) summary is shown in table 1. This data is from the NIWA Cliflo database. This site is free so feel free to have a look at cliflo.niwa.cri.nz. The monthly statistics might be useful for a guide about what to expect in your area. The data shows the number of days that might affect harvesting. In general it is quite uniform across New Zealand and it seems to become wetter as we reach April. Having said that the warm, oceanic weather in New Zealand is quite variable. The recent heavy rain on the East Coast is proof of that. If we look at the data in more detail, the wettest month can have up to 13 rain days and the driest month can have no days. Thank heaven we don't live in Australia. They seem to get hammered with either a rain famine or a glut. Recently I was looking at the weather in Western Australia. They should have been growing rice not apples.

Region	Month			
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr
Northland	7	7	7	11
Auckland	7	6	8	10
Waikato	6	5	7	11
Bay of Plenty	6	7	8	9
Poverty Bay	7	8	9	9
Hawkes Bay	5	5	6	7
Horowhenua	8	7	8	8
Nelson	7	5	6	7
Blenheim	5	5	5	6
Christchurch	6	5	6	8
Central Otago	6	5	4	5
Average	6	6	7	8

Table 1 : Rain days of > 1mm in each region from 1990 to 2009

Another source of information about the weather conditions to expect over harvest is the Southern Oscillation Index. This index is currently at -10.1. The recent trend is shown in figure 1. A weak El Nino pattern has been with us for the last few months. A comparative year is the summer of 2007. A quick check of your diary might be worth a look to see what happened then. I have had a look at our records and can't see anything extraordinary. Perhaps slightly wetter in Nelson, Horowhenua and Northland.

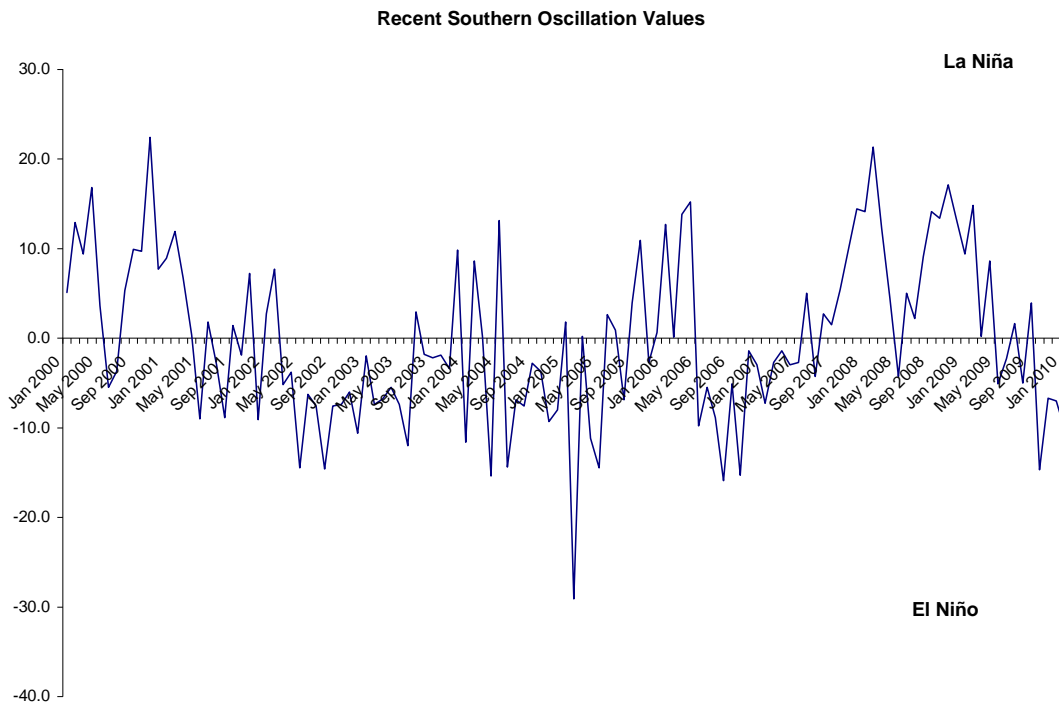


Figure 1 : Recent Southern Oscillation Index Values

One feature of the Southern Oscillation is how quickly it can change. Look at May 2006 or May 2008. These rapid swings can change us from a La Nina state to El Nino. Looking at the history going back to 1876 shows that this rapid swing is quite common. Exactly what this means for us is unclear but there was a rapid change during our last big El Nino event of 1998 during April and May.

Users of Metwatch Online could also check the seasonal summaries to see how things are going. The 2010 year so far has been characterised by very heavy rain in January and it has been slightly cooler in all regions but the difference is very small.

HortPlus is about to implement a 10 day forecast of temperatures and rain probability. This should be quite useful for short term planning. We have checked the accuracy of these forecasts and were surprised by the results. Accuracy was quite good. Large rainfall events are rarely missed. However, forecasts beyond this are not much use. Seasonal forecasts can be very inaccurate and are filled with esoteric nonsense that hardly anyone understands. You have been warned. We hope you have a good harvest and may the exchange rate turn in our favour for once.

As always, predicting what will happen over this harvest is hard to predict. What we have tried to present you with here are a few ideas that may direct your thoughts. If you have any comments, they can be emailed to hortplus@gmail.com.