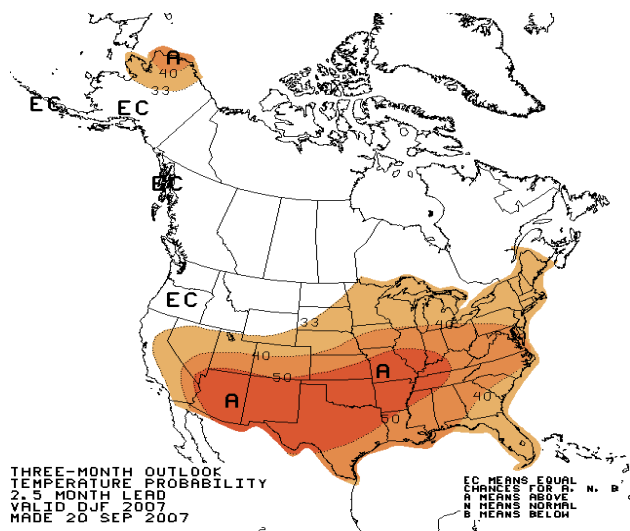


La Nina is finally here! In the last two additions of Under the Big Sky there was talk about the possibility that the El Nino that was experienced last winter might quickly transition to a La Nina pattern this summer. As you may recall a La Nina is a periodic cooling of ocean surface temperatures in the central and east-central Pacific that usually occurs every 3 to 5 years. It took longer than expected, but La Nina is now officially here. A weak to moderate La Nina is expected to persist through the winter.

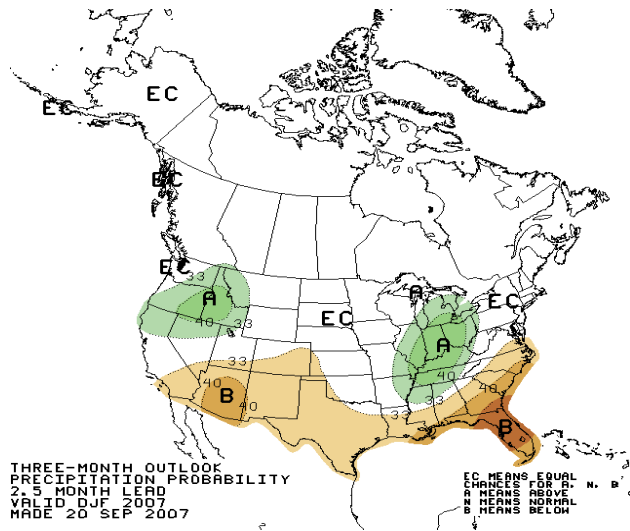
So, what does all this mean for the weather across northeast Montana for the fall and winter? There is a strong correlation across the Northern Plains for colder than average temperatures during the winter months during a La Nina. During the fall months there is no strong climate signal generated by a La Nina across the Northern Plains.

There are several factors that make the long range seasonal forecasts complex. The last time we had a La Nina was in the winter of 2000-2001. This winter had alternating spells of both well above and well below average temperatures. January was unusually mild, but the three month period of December-February was colder than average. This La Nina developed during the summer of 1998 and lasted for nearly three years. Two of the three winters ended up with above average temperatures. So, although historical data which dates back to 1950 indicates an increased likelihood of a cold winter during a La Nina there are other competing climate factors that can and do influence the weather. A La Nina or an El Nino is not a guarantee of any particular outcome.

Right now the best temperature forecast for this coming winter across the Treasure State is climatology – with equal chances of below, near, or above normal temperatures. See the figure below with the official forecast from the Climate Prediction Center.



As far as precipitation goes, the best forecast for this coming winter is climatology – with equal chances of below, near, or above average precipitation. There is an increased likelihood of above average precipitation along and west of the continental divide.



Of course anyone that has lived in Montana during the winter months knows that it pays to be prepared for bouts of bitter sub-zero cold and blizzards. In general, these are conditions that can only be forecasted days in advance, and winter weather does at times change rapidly. Be sure to check your National Weather Service forecast before venturing outside, and especially as you travel across the state this winter. You can Dial 511 or 1-800-226-7623 (both numbers are toll free) to get road conditions and weather forecasts across the state.