

Despite minimal risk from El Nino, Maryland isn't taking any chances

By Sean Scully
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PIKESVILLE, Md. — In an austere war room at the heart of a Cold War-era bomb shelter deep under state police headquarters, Maryland officials yesterday outlined their "action plan" to deal with the effects of the dreaded El Nino.

The forecast for Maryland in the face of the mysterious weather phenomenon?

Temperatures about normal, precipitation about normal.

The state is ready, officials declared proudly.

Maryland Gov. Parris N. Glendening this fall founded the state's new El Nino Monitoring and Coordination Group, a part of the Maryland Emergency Management Agency, headquartered in the old bomb shelter.

The resulting action plan includes such goals as "enhancing of exercise scenario to include El Nino affected storms," and establishing a "toll-free 800 Number for citizens to access important information."

The governor himself is head of

the coordinating group, which has met once and will meet again as events dictate.

During El Nino, which happens periodically and unpredictably, the surface water in the central Pacific Ocean is unusually warm. The change has profound effects on the weather in some parts of the world. For example, El Nino usually means drought in Ohio, Montana and the Dakotas. California, the Great Plains and the Gulf Coast, meanwhile, see more rain. Florida, which relies on winter tourism and agriculture, sees unusually cold weather.

So plenty of states have plenty to worry about. But not Maryland.

National Weather Service meteorologist Barbara McNaught-Watson said at the briefing that El Nino years do tend to bring a greater chance of a snowstorm of 9 inches or more.

El Nino also means a greater chance of Nor'easters, the windy and wet coastal storms that can mean flooding in low-lying areas.

But both kinds of storms are fairly common in the mid-Atlantic region, even when there is no El

Nino. And other states in the area aren't doing anything special about El Nino's effects.

For the record, the toll-free number for information on El Nino — and any other disaster-related information — is 800/422-8799.

The "action plan" didn't cost taxpayers extra, MEMA Director David McMillion said.

In fact, Mr. McMillion said, much of the action plan is actually things that the agency does routinely, such as efforts to coordinate with neighboring states on flood plans for the Delmarva Peninsula.

"We just packaged it a little differently," he said.

Delegate Alfred W. Redmer, a Baltimore County Republican and member of the House Environmental Affairs Committee, snorted when told of the governor's action plan.

"While we have children graduating from school that can't count or read properly, people uninsured and going without health care, crime and drugs in the street, I will sleep much better tonight knowing we at least have El Nino under control," he said.