May Gray Turns to June Gloom

**From Issue: Volume XIX - Number 12
1/1/1900** *Kirt Ramirez*

Tis the season — for “June gloom” that is.

Southern California coastal residents may not think about it much, but we have something special and rare — a weather phenomenon that occurs from May to July. Visitors don’t understand it. The locals know the pattern well. But what causes it?

The University of California San Diego’s, Climate Research Division summarizes June gloom and provides a satellite image of thick marine clouds hugging the coast:

“The sun-seeking know to avoid Southern California beaches in the late spring. A period known to the locals as May Gray and/or June Gloom often darkens the coastal skies of sunny Southern California with a layer of marine stratus. During this time, the coastal clouds may remain all day but often give way to some hazy afternoon sunshine. The number of days during this two-month period that are gloomy vary from year to year.”

The U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) also discusses the marine layer and says it can persist for quite a while along the west coast, particularly Southern California.

The NOAA National Weather Service says: “The reason is, the water along the west coast of the United States comes from the Gulf of Alaska ... The colder water means the air in contact with the water is colder and therefore is more dense.”

We sought to explain June gloom further.

Long Beach City College Geography Instructor, Douglas Fetters, said California’s waters come from Alaska as part of a larger system. A specific current, the California Current — which comes out of the larger Alaskan system — starts near British Columbia, Canada and that’s the one that runs along our coast. This time of the year surface winds increase around British Columbia that allows upwelling of the frigid, arctic waters. This upwelling of the ocean kicks up even colder water and forms that colder-than-usual water that is currently hitting us. Nutrients are also kicked up and this is why the Seattle area is good for fishing.

Fetters explained that the California Current is always cold, but this time of the year it’s even colder. The colder the California Current, the more fog we’re going to have, the more overcast weather we have here on the coast,” he said. When the ocean is that cold, water vapor in the air cools down to form fog or clouds when the dew point is reached (the temperature at which water vapor in the air starts to condense). Only a few other places on the planet share our type of weather, including the west coasts of South Africa and Australia and the Mediterranean.

“If the California Current weren’t here, we’d have a much different climate. That helps create our Mediterranean climate — is that cold water current,” Fetters said. “It’s a blessing. But for those two months it’s not nice beach weather.”

Florida is the complete opposite of California. There it gets hot, muggy and miserable. Fetters said that is due to the warm Gulf Stream, which goes up along the east coast and onto the North Atlantic and is a contributing factor to Europe’s weather.

Asked why California surfers wear wetsuits when surfers in other parts of the world do not, Casey Lysdale of Jack’s Surfboards in Huntington Beach said: “Because the water is too cold to surf without it.”

Meanwhile, two tourists wearing jackets had a picnic near Rainbow Lagoon Park June 12.

“We’re surprised in California about the weather,” said Diane Allaire, 64, on vacation here from Quebec, French Canada. “We thought the weather would be more sunny.” She said she thought the weather would be like the television show *Baywatch*.

Fetters shared some details. He used to drive from Woodland Hills to get to work in Santa Monica during the 1990s and would see what appeared to be *Baywatch* filming taking place off of PCH. He said he did not see shooting in June or July when it was overcast. But they would tape in April, late summer, fall and other times. Often the weather would be cold on the beach, though sunny. He would watch the women do a scene for a few minutes and then quickly put a jacket on after the scene ended. Or they would run back to the dressing room.

*Baywatch* was widely watched by the world, giving the impression it’s always hot and sunny along the Southern California coast. But this is not true. It is often sunny, but it is often cool at the same time. The coast can get warm in late July into September — but not always. Since the water is always cold, the mix of warm sun and cold air creates perfect weather. Of course 30 miles inland is a different story.