

The Winter That Never Was
March 1, 2016

A warm, windy and dry February, plagued by wildfires, served as a fitting epitaph for a winter that largely failed to materialize. According to preliminary data from the Oklahoma Mesonet, the month ended more than 5 degrees above normal to rank as the ninth warmest February since records began in 1895. That propelled the climatological winter, December through February, to the fourth warmest on record at nearly 4 degrees above normal. February high temperatures rose consistently into the 70s and 80s according to the Mesonet, with Buffalo reaching the month's highest reading of 91 degrees on the 18th. The lowest temperature of 2 degrees was recorded at Kenton on the third. Only three single-digit low temperatures were reported by the 120 Mesonet stations during February. The 91 degrees at Buffalo was also the winter's highest reported temperature. Somewhat more unusual was the lack of any temperatures that fell below zero during the winter. Kenton fell to zero degrees on Dec. 17th for the Mesonet's lowest winter temperature, and the National Weather Service (NWS) cooperative observers at Okay and Ralston matched that mark.

Giving February an extra day this leap year helped improve the rainfall statistics with a burst of spring weather to end the month. Storms, severe at times, fired early in the evening across western Oklahoma before progressing east overnight. The rainfall amounts were spotty, but added enough moisture to bump the statewide average for the month to 1.13 inches, 0.7 inches below normal. The NWS cooperative site at Broken Bow led the state with 2.55 inches during February while Idabel led the Mesonet with 2.15 inches. The Boise City Mesonet site brought up the rear with 0.09 inches. The wettest December on record helped boost the winter to rank as the 15th wettest for the state at 1.5 inches above normal, despite the 19th driest January-February period. The first two months of the year saw a statewide average of 1.64 inches, nearly 2 inches below normal.

The spate of dry weather since the beginning of 2016 left the state with something it had not seen since late last fall – a splotch of color on the U.S. Drought Monitor map. Granted, there was no drought indicated on that map, but small patches of abnormally dry (D0) conditions were noted across south central and west central Oklahoma. Although not a drought designation, the abnormally dry label can indicate areas that are either entering or exiting drought; the former in this case. The dry start to the year combined with the warm and windy weather during February to create numerous days with high fire danger. The worst of those days came on Feb. 18 when highs in the 80s and 90s combined with winds gusting up to 60 mph and relative humidity readings in the teens to spark several large fires across the state. Tens of thousands of acres were burned, including a 22,000 acre fire in Okmulgee and Okfuskee counties and a 17,000 acre fire in Harper County. The fire danger remained high through the month's final day.

The Climate Prediction Center (CPC) continues to hint at an influence from El Niño through at least mid-spring. The March precipitation outlook shows increased odds of above normal precipitation across the entire state, but especially across the western third including the Panhandle. As El Niño is expected to fade, so are the odds of wetter than normal conditions. Those odds weaken and shrink westward through spring before dissipating in the summer. The outlook for May-July sees the last remnants of El Niño's influence, albeit weakly, across the Panhandle. The odds of below normal precipitation then begin to take hold and expand across the Southern Plains next fall and winter with the expected development of La Niña conditions in the equatorial pacific. Given the bullish precipitation outlook for the next several months, CPC's March and Seasonal U.S. Drought Outlooks do not depict any drought developing within the state of Oklahoma through the end of May.

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