

The Two Faces Of January

February 3, 2015

The old adage "numbers never lie" is a good principle in theory, but often dangerous if used within the context of Oklahoma's eccentric weather patterns. For example, the statewide average temperature and precipitation values for January ended very close to normal, but the journey to those numbers was anything but. The first half of the month was frigid and mostly dry, somewhat typical of a cold Oklahoma January. Around the 15th, however, the weather decided it was time for spring a couple of months early. The second half of the month brought a string of record-breaking temperatures, high fire danger and bursts of moisture. According to preliminary data from the Oklahoma Mesonet, the statewide average temperature was 37.9 degrees, just a couple of tenths of a degree above normal and the 51st warmest January since records began in 1895. But again, the journey to those numbers was the remarkable story. For example, the statewide average high temperature for the Jan. 1-14 period was 37.4 degrees, 11.1 degrees below normal while the second half enjoyed a statewide average high of 60 degrees, 10.1 degrees above normal. Oklahoma City broke daily maximum temperature records on four separate days, including three in a row from Jan. 26-28. During those periods of record warmth, wildfire danger rose to extreme levels with strong gusty winds and low humidity accompanying the warm weather. The highest January temperature recorded by the Mesonet was 84 degrees at Alva on January 27 and the lowest was minus 6 degrees at Boise City on the fourth.

The January statewide average precipitation total of 1.53 inches was equally unremarkable, just three-hundredths below normal to rank as the 48th wettest on record. One would be hard pressed to find a northeastern Oklahoman satisfied with their moisture totals for the month, however, since most of that region ended with a deficit of 1-2 inches. On the other hand, much of southern and western Oklahoma had a surplus. And while that moisture was much needed, it must be remembered that January is normally Oklahoma's driest month, so a surplus is not necessarily the bounty it appears to be at first glance. The Mesonet site at Broken Bow in far southeastern Oklahoma led the state with 4.82 inches. Hooker had the lowest January total at 0.55 inches. Some of January's moisture fell as snow and ice. Boise City reported 14 inches of snow for January, about twice the next highest total of 7.5 inches at Sayre. Boise City has recorded a total of 20.7 inches for the season thus far. Guymon and Erick are the only other locations in double digits with 11.8 inches and 10.8 inches, respectively.

The surplus moisture across western and southern Oklahoma was not enough to make a big dent in the drought, now well into its fifth year. Some areas report a shortfall of more than 50 inches since the drought began back in the fall of 2010. At month's end, more than 60 percent of the state was considered to be in drought by the U.S. Drought Monitor, with at least 45 percent in the severe category. The amount in extreme-exceptional drought held steady at about 23 percent. The Drought Monitor's intensity scale slides from moderate-severe-extreme-exceptional, with exceptional being the worst classification.

The February temperature and precipitation outlooks from the National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center (CPC) contain no information for the Oklahoma area, other than to indicate "Equal Chances" for above-, near- and below-normal values for the month. Given that February is Oklahoma's second driest month on average, CPC's U.S. Monthly Drought Outlook for February calls for drought, at least where it exists at the end of January, to either persist or intensify through the month. Additional drought development is thought likely across the eastern edge of the drought area where rainfall deficits continue to mount.

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