

Winter Makes Presence Known During February
March 2, 2015

The first two weeks of February in Oklahoma were a nice preview of spring with temperatures rising at times into the 70s and 80s with just a few mildly cold days scattered here and there. The final two weeks were a different story altogether, however, as the frigid arctic air ensconced across the eastern half of the country slid its way west and into the state. The forgotten season flexed its muscles at that point with several rounds of wintry weather, punctuated during the month's final few days with several rounds of snow, sleet and freezing rain. Valentine's Day was the turning point as temperatures in the 70s and 80s gave way to 30s and 40s the following day with little relief through the rest of the month. That two week cold snap propelled the month to rank as the 25th coolest on record with a statewide average of 37.1 degrees according to preliminary data from the Oklahoma Mesonet, 5 degrees below normal. Arnett reached 85 degrees on the seventh to mark the month's highest temperature while Kenton fell to 1 degree to claim the lowest reading. The climatological winter season (December-February) ended as the 54th coolest on record, a half-degree below normal.

The month was also drier than normal for most of the state, regardless of the rain, snow and ice that fell. The Mesonet measured a statewide average of 0.7 inches, 1.13 inches below normal to rank as the 24th driest February since records began in 1895. That should be considered an underestimate, however, since the snow and ice on the month's final few days had yet to melt in the Mesonet's precipitation gauges. Nevertheless, radar estimates confirm that for most of Oklahoma, February's totals were from 75 percent to less than 50 percent of normal. More than 10 inches of snow fell across the eastern Panhandle during February, but significant totals fell over all sections of Oklahoma. The National Weather Service (NWS) cooperative observer at Centrahoma in south central Oklahoma reported 7 inches, and totals of 4 inches or greater were common throughout the state. Boise City led all measuring sites across the state for the winter season thus far with 28.1 inches, although Guymon was close behind at 21.3 inches. The climatological winter was the 22nd driest on record with a statewide average of 1.68 inches, 1.71 inches below normal.

The disappointing winter moisture totals, along with the periods of unusually warm and windy weather, led to bad news on the drought front during February and the winter season. The amount of drought in the state increased from 61 percent at the end of January to 66 percent at the end of February according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. At the end of November, 60 percent of the state was considered in drought. The amount of the state in extreme or exceptional drought rose from 18 percent in November to 28 percent at the end of February. The Drought Monitor's intensity scale slides from moderate-severe-extreme-exceptional, with exceptional being the worst classification. The percent of the state in "abnormally dry" conditions, a precursor to drought, rose from 76 percent to 99 percent over that same period.

The dry winter leaves the state teetering on rapid drought intensification if the spring rainy season disappoints once again. The temperature outlooks from the NWS' Climate Prediction Center (CPC) for March and March-May both indicated increased odds for below normal temperatures across the state. The precipitation outlooks were indeterminate for most of Oklahoma, however, giving equal chances for above-, below- or near-normal moisture for those same two periods. Only the Panhandle and far southwest saw increased odds for above normal precipitation, and only during the March-May period. CPC's U.S. Monthly Drought Outlook calls for drought to persist or intensify during March where it currently exists in the state, and drought development to be likely across parts of central and southern Oklahoma. The U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook, relying upon the climatological wet months of April and May, see drought improvement or removal possible across much of the eastern two-thirds of Oklahoma.