

Arrival Of Spring Fails To Rescue Dry March April 1, 2013

The wet conditions of February failed to translate into March, but the cooler than normal weather continued virtually uninterrupted. According to data from the Oklahoma Mesonet, the month's statewide average temperature was 47.7 degrees, 2.5 degrees below normal and the 45th coolest March since records began in 1895. The two months together accomplished a relatively rare feat of late, becoming first consecutive months to finish below normal in Oklahoma since January and February 2011. This March stands in stark contrast to last year's record-breaking version, which ended at 59.6 degrees, 9.4 degrees above normal. Thanks to a late-month taste of spring storminess, the statewide average rainfall total climbed to 1.5 inches for the month, which fell about 1.6 inches below normal and ranked as the 33th driest on record. The first three months of the year came out fairly close to normal for both precipitation and temperature. The statewide average January-March temperature finished at 42.8 degrees, a tenth of a degree above normal, while the precipitation total of 6.44 inches was a tenth of an in above normal as well.

That late burst of springtime weather also came with a fair amount of severe weather. Reports of hail from the size of marbles to tennis balls came in from across the state on the 29th and 30th. Hail covered the ground and actually drifted in some parts of the state. At least one tornado was confirmed to have touched down late on the 30th in Sequoyah County near Sallisaw, damaging a home and downing power poles. More localized severe weather struck southern Oklahoma on the ninth and northern Oklahoma saw up to 3 inches of snow on the 24th.

The cooler than normal weather kept drought from spreading or intensifying, although drought impacts continued to be felt statewide. Data from the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service indicate 49 percent of the state's topsoils were rated as either "adequate" or "surplus" for moisture, meaning 51 percent were rated as "short" or "very short." Subsoils have not fared quite so well given the long-term nature of this drought. The subsoils were rated at 88 percent "short" or "very short" and only 12 percent were rated as "adequate." State pasture and range conditions were rated 70 percent "very poor" or "poor," with only 25 percent rated as "fair" and 5 percent rated as "good." Approximately 10 percent of the state was covered by Exceptional drought according to the latest U.S. Drought Monitor report, down from 35 percent three months ago. The entire state has remained in at least Moderate drought since July 2012. The Drought Monitor's intensity scale slides from Moderate-Severe-Extreme-Exceptional, with exceptional being the worst category.

A very active weather pattern appears possible during the first two weeks of April, which could bring further drought relief. Short- to medium-range forecast models indicate the potential for 2-4 inches of rainfall across the state during the first two weeks of the month. The April precipitation outlook from the National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center showed increased odds of above normal precipitation across the southeastern third of the state. The temperature outlook indicated increased odds of warmer than normal weather across all of Oklahoma. The U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook for April-June does call for drought to either persist or intensify through June for the southwestern third of the state and the Panhandle. Northeast of that area, "some improvement" could be seen, meaning drought will continue but not be eliminated. Far northeastern Oklahoma is expected to see drought improvement and impacts ease.

April is normally the fifth wettest month of the year with a statewide average of 3.36 inches. The last two Aprils have finished wetter than normal, only to be followed by drought intensification during May and June. The last two Aprils were also active severe weather months with 50 tornadoes during April 2011 and 53 in 2012, breaking the record for number of April tornadoes in consecutive years.