March Brings Severe Weather To Oklahoma
April 1, 2015

It took nearly the entire month, but severe weather finally made a rather abrupt return to Oklahoma during the last week of March. Two separate storm systems brought severe winds, large hail and tornadoes after a hiatus filled mostly with winter weather headlines. On March 25, a combination of thunderstorm winds and an intermittent tornado that reached EF-2 in strength traveled through southwest Oklahoma City and Moore before dissipating in north Norman. The twister caused significant damage to Southgate Elementary in central Moore and the surrounding neighborhood. Seven injuries were reported with that storm. The worst news came with another EF-2 twister that struck near Sand Springs that same day, killing one resident and injuring 30 others. A weak EF-0 tornado was confirmed to have touched down in northeast Tulsa, damaging homes and businesses. The death near Sand Springs marks the first tornado related fatality in Oklahoma since one person was killed near Quapaw on April 27, 2014. Three other fatalities were attributed to the March 25 storms by the State Medical Examiner. One person died in a single-vehicle traffic accident in Norman and two others were drowned by flash flood waters as they were swept off a bridge near Webbers Falls. Severe weather struck on the month's final day with large hail, damaging winds of over 80 mph and flash flooding from southwestern through east central Oklahoma. The Bowlegs Mesonet station in Seminole County reported 5.85 inches of rain in a 6-hour period. As mentioned previously, winter weather had a hand in March weather as well. A blanket of snow and sleet from 2-4 inches deep covered a good portion of the state on March 4, closing schools and creating hazardous driving conditions.

Oklahoma's other weather disaster, the ongoing multi-year drought, continued to intensify across western and northern Oklahoma, although some relief did occur in the southeast. According to preliminary data from the Oklahoma Mesonet, the statewide average precipitation total was 2.63 inches, 0.41 inches below normal. That does not give an accurate picture of the moisture fortunes for the differing areas of the state, however. The southeast saw an average of nearly 6 inches, 1.45 inches above normal, to rank as the 17th wettest March on record for that area. The west central and north central regions experienced deficits greater than 1.5 inches each and ranked as the 33rd driest and 31st driest March on record for those areas, respectively. Broken Bow led the state with 9.29 inches while Cheyenne only managed 0.3 inches for the month. Most of the northwestern half of the state ended March with 60 percent to less than 20 percent of normal rainfall. The statewide average temperature was 51.5 degrees, more than a degree above normal to rank as the 41st warmest March on record. Hollis led all high temperatures in the state with 92 degrees recorded on the 25th. Tipton and Kingfisher reported the lowest readings at minus 1 degree on March 5.

Even with the generous moisture totals in the southeast, the month's final U.S. Drought Monitor report indicated nearly 51 percent of the state was in at least severe drought and 36 percent in extreme-to-exceptional drought. Both percentages are increases from February's final map. The Drought Monitor’s intensity scale slides from moderate-severe-extreme-exceptional, with exceptional being the worst classification. Prospects for April don't look promising according to the Climate Prediction Center (CPC). Their Monthly Drought Outlook for April sees the drought either persisting or intensifying across the state through the end of the month. CPC's April temperature and precipitation outlooks call for an increased chance of above normal temperatures across the entire state and slightly increased odds for above normal precipitation over far southeast Oklahoma.

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