

March More Lion Than Lamb
April 3, 2017

Although drought, severe storms and flooding rainfall all made their presence known during the month, March's weather story was dominated by fire. Several months of elevated fire danger came to a head March 6 with the ignition of four large wildfires across far northwestern Oklahoma and southern Kansas. The group of fires was labeled the "Northwest Oklahoma Complex." The wildfires, pressed by winds gusting to more than 60 mph, scorched a total of 779,292 acres. Approximately 472,000 acres of that total were in Kansas. The cost of the fires, both to property and lives, was tremendous. The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service estimates the economic impact of the fires at more than \$16 million, including the loss of livestock, habitat and infrastructure. Losses to cattle operations alone were \$14.6 million. The Extension totals did not include estimates for equipment or other losses. At least eight homes were destroyed by the fires in Oklahoma. Two Oklahomans died in the wildfires. A 39-year-old semitrailer truck driver from Enid died from smoke inhalation in the southern Kansas portion of the wildfires, and a 63-year-old woman suffered a fatal heart attack while fighting the fire on her farm near Buffalo.

The year's first confirmed tornado touched down near Bunch in Adair County on March 6. Another possible tornado was reported by a trained spotter east of Ada the evening of the 26th. A straight-line wind gust of 95 mph was reported by the Oklahoma Mesonet site at El Reno the evening of the 28th. Rain totals were highly variable, as is the custom with springtime thunderstorms. The western third of the state was the beneficiary of a moisture surplus with some spots reporting totals 1-2 inches above normal. Southeastern Oklahoma saw the biggest deficits, which reached 3-4 inches below normal in localized areas. The statewide average rainfall total was 2.54 inches, a half-inch below normal and the 54th wettest March on record. West central Oklahoma's average total of 3.04 inches was the 17th wettest March on record for that area while south central Oklahoma's 1.26 inches was their 20th driest. The Mesonet site at Acme led the state with 5.1 inches while Kenton and Fittstown brought up the rear at 0.7 inches.

Despite a relatively cooler final week, March finished decidedly warm. According to preliminary data from the Oklahoma Mesonet, the statewide average temperature was 55.1 degrees, 4.7 degrees above normal and the 10th warmest March since records began in 1895. The lowest temperature of the month, 14 degrees, was recorded at both Buffalo and Kenton. The award for highest reading during March went to Butler, which reached 98 degrees on the 20th. The first three months of 2017 rank as the second warmest on record at 5.2 degrees above normal.

The drought situation was significantly improved across the northwestern half of the state by the end of March, even if it was not reflected in the month's final Drought Monitor report. While 73 percent of the state was considered in drought of at least moderate intensity at the end of February, that number had increased to 81 percent by March 21. The amount of severe-extreme drought increased from 29 percent to 46 percent during that period. Thanks to some hefty rains, that total had decreased to 36 percent on the last March report, with more improvements expected on the first April report. At the end of March, 78 percent of the state was considered in drought.

The Climate Prediction Center's (CPC) April temperature outlook sees increased odds for above normal temperatures across all of Oklahoma. The precipitation outlook shows slightly increased odds of above normal moisture in far southeastern Oklahoma, but is indeterminate for the rest of Oklahoma. Accordingly, using those outlooks as well as climatological normals, drought is expected to persist or intensify across northwestern Oklahoma during April, but improve across the eastern half of the state.

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