

## Fire, Tornadoes Steal March Weather Headlines April 1, 2016

The dry weather that had plagued the state during the first two months of 2016 continued during March. Drought conditions spread across nearly all of northwestern Oklahoma and aided the massive Anderson Creek wildfire that burned 367,620 acres across Woods County in Oklahoma and the adjacent counties in southern Kansas. The total acreage burned in Oklahoma amounted to 88,082, all within Woods County. The fire, whipped by winds of over 60 mph, began on March 22 near Camp Houston in Woods County before quickly spreading to the north and then east. Oklahoma Forestry Services estimated more than 1,000 bales of hay, hundreds of miles of fence and approximately 600 livestock were lost in the Oklahoma portion of the fire, and altogether 16 residential structures and 25 other structures were burned in Kansas and Oklahoma. The fire was the fourth largest to occur east of the Rockies in at least the last two decades according to the National Interagency Fire Center. Many other smaller fires burned in other areas of the state throughout the month.

The month's other big weather story was the outbreak of severe weather on March 30. A strong upper-level storm system and associated surface front, complete with a distinct dryline, kicked off storms early in the afternoon across south central and central Oklahoma, some of which quickly became severe. The worst storms were saved for northeastern Oklahoma later in the evening. The National Weather Service office in Tulsa reported two tornadoes on the night, both rated EF-2 in strength. The first started south of Skiatook in Osage County and traveled through north Tulsa before lifting near Verdigris in Rogers County. Significant damage and four injuries were reported with this tornado. That same storm then produced another tornado near Claremore, again producing significant damage. Other reports of large hail, strong winds and torrential downpours were noted from south central up through northeastern Oklahoma during the day.

Other notable events during March include a late snowfall on Eastern Sunday, a late freeze, and an increase in drought conditions across northwestern Oklahoma. The snowfall amounts on the 27<sup>th</sup> were generally between 2-4 inches and confined to the Panhandle and far northwestern Oklahoma. Laverne led preliminary totals with 6 inches. The week before, a cold front ushered in frigid air that dropped minimum temperatures well below seasonal norms. From March 18-21, much of the state had spent at least 10 hours below freezing according to the Mesonet, with the northwestern quarter seeing temperatures drop below 24 degrees for similar time periods.

According to preliminary data from the Oklahoma Mesonet, the March statewide average rainfall total was 2.4 inches, more than half an inch below normal. That total was a bit deceptive, however, due to heavy rainfall across the southeastern quarter of the state. Most other areas were from 1-2 inches below normal. That brought the year-to-date statewide average to 3.8 inches, 2.6 inches below normal, to rank as the 30<sup>th</sup> driest January-March since records began in 1895. The Panhandle and north central Oklahoma saw their 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-driest first three months of the year, respectively. That dry stretch allowed moderate drought to span nearly 20 percent of the state according to the March 29 U.S. Drought Monitor report, all in the northwestern corner of the state. In addition, more than 39 percent of the state was considered to be abnormally dry, a precursor to drought. Warmer than normal weather aided the intensifying drought. The statewide average as measured by the Mesonet was 54.2 degrees, 3.8 degrees above normal and the 18<sup>th</sup> warmest March on record. Combined with the warm start to the year, that brought the January-March statewide average to 46.6 degrees, the 12<sup>th</sup> warmest such period on record.

A look to the future shows dry and warm weather possibly continuing for the first 10 days of April before wetter conditions materialize. The Climate Prediction Center's April precipitation outlook

indicates increased odds for above normal rainfall across the western third of the state, especially across the western Panhandle. The outlook for temperature shows increased odds for above normal temperature across the entire state, but again especially across the western Panhandle. Despite the wet signal across the northwest, the U.S. Monthly Drought Outlook forecasts the current drought conditions across the northwest to continue through April, but no further drought is expected to develop by the end of the month.

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