

April Sees Active Weather Ignite
May 2, 2016

Fears of the strengthening drought and associated wildfire danger, so prevalent through the first three months of the year, lasted about a week into April before Mother Nature unleashed spring on Oklahoma. Flooding, gigantic hail, severe winds and a final week filled with the threat of tornadoes were all in the offing during the month. The drought was quenched in most parts of the state by repeated storm systems. According to preliminary data from the Oklahoma Mesonet, the robust moisture propelled April to rank as the seventh wettest on record, dating back to 1895. The statewide average of 6.11 inches was nearly 3 inches above normal. Regional ranks ranged from the third wettest April for southwestern Oklahoma to the 27th wettest in east central parts of the state. Broken Bow led the Mesonet's totals with 16.95 inches while Arnett had a more modest 2.23 inches. A few pockets in far western and east central Oklahoma had below normal rainfall and remained a concern for droughty conditions due to deficits that date to the beginning of the year. The month was also the 39th warmest April on record at 1.5 degrees above normal. Altus recorded a statewide high of 92 degrees on the 25th. Boise City recorded the last freeze of the month with 32 degrees on the 18th.

Despite the gaudy statistics, the real star of the month was the extreme and sometimes violent weather. Wildfires during that dry first week dominated the headlines, and none more so than the "350 Complex Fire" in northwest Oklahoma. The fire began on April 5 and burned uncontrolled for days despite the efforts of fire crews, some from as far away as Tennessee. Emergency management personnel estimated damages at \$2.3 million from the fire as it scorched nearly 90 square miles in Woodward and Harper counties. The weather became much more exciting following that point with a cavalcade of powerful storm systems. Torrential rains fell from the 10th through the 20th, particularly across southern Oklahoma and the western Panhandle. Cimarron County saw severe flooding from 3-6 inches in some areas, nearly a third of their normal annual total. Two confirmed weak tornadoes touched down near Eva in Texas County on April 15, damaging a couple of farmhouses and out buildings. A few days of nice weather followed from the 21st through the 25th before severe weather erupted again on the heels of two consecutive storm systems. The first on the 26th dropped at least eight confirmed tornadoes from across the state according to local National Weather Service (NWS) offices, although all were considered weak tornadoes rated at EF-0 or EF-1 intensity. Nevertheless, the twisters and associated straight-line winds were quite damaging to power infrastructure, trees, residences and businesses. Flash flood warnings were issued for some of the storms, and hail to the size of golf balls was reported. Finally, the month closed out with another storm system on the 29th. Tornadic supercells were once again on the agenda, forming in southwestern Oklahoma before marching to the east and northeast. At least three confirmed tornadoes touched down according to NWS survey teams, but that preliminary number could go higher as more investigations are conducted. As with the twisters previously in the week, the confirmed tornadoes were all of the weak variety, but still damaging. Large hail was widespread with this round of storms. Ice to the size of grapefruits fell in Comanche County, with several other reports of baseball size hail or larger scattered around the state. More flooding occurred, especially across southeastern Oklahoma. The Mesonet site at Broken Bow recorded 8.73 inches of rain on the 29th, and several other southeastern Mesonet sites saw more than 4 inches.

The May temperature outlook from the NWS' Climate Prediction Center sees increased odds of below normal temperatures for the western two-thirds of the state, with the highest odds across the western one-half. The precipitation outlook is bullish on above normal precipitation across all of Oklahoma, but especially the southwestern two-thirds. CPC's May drought outlook indicates Oklahoma's already diminishing drought is expected to be eradicated by the end of the month.

###