El Niño's Impacts Fizzle During January
Feb. 1, 2016

Considering the extreme precipitation that ended 2015, and with the "super" El Niño that boosted the November-December period to the wettest on record for the state still in place, January was a veritable dud. According to preliminary data from the Oklahoma Mesonet, the statewide average precipitation total was 0.71 inches, nearly an inch below normal and the 28th driest January since records began in 1895. Only 29 of the Mesonet's 120 stations recorded at least an inch of rain, and only three exceeded 2 inches. Cloudy led all Mesonet sites with 2.45 inches. Boise City recorded a state low of 0.08 inches. Oklahoma City's official observing site at Will Rogers Airport received 0.11 inches, the 12th driest January on record dating back to 1891. Tulsa fared a bit better with 0.61 inches, the 24th driest dating back to 1894. Some of the precipitation across the state fell as snow and ice, but those totals were fairly limited. The National Weather Service cooperative observer at Sayre recorded a respectable 3.8 inches for the state's largest official total. Boise City still led the seasonal total with 19.5 inches of snowfall. Arnett was a distant second with 11.2 inches. Those are the only official observing sites with double-digit seasonal snowfall totals thus far.

Similar to precipitation, the relative warmth of the last two months of 2015 faded soon after Christmas, not to return until the end of January. The November-December period was more than 4 degrees above normal and the fourth warmest on record. Despite the return to more seasonable weather, however, the month still finished above normal according to Mesonet data. The statewide average of 38.2 degrees was half a degree above normal to rank as the 49th warmest on record. While it never got exceptionally cold in the state – the lowest temperature recorded by the Mesonet was a mere 4 degrees at Kenton on the 11th, fairly benign by January's standards – we did not see those high temperatures rebound back into the 70s and 80s until the month's final week. Southwestern Oklahoma received a sneak preview of summer with widespread 80s on the 29th and 30th. Hollis reached the month's highest temperature of 85 degrees on the 30th. Oklahoma City and McAlester either tied or broke high temperature records on the 29th and 30th. The warmth and lack of moisture combined with high winds to create elevated wildfire danger at the end of the month. Wildfires were reported across many areas in central and western Oklahoma.

The strong El Niño that many experts attribute, at least partially, Oklahoma's record breaking 2015 rainfall to has peaked according to Climate Prediction Center (CPC) forecasters. The phenomenon is expected to gradually weaken through spring 2016 before transitioning to neutral conditions during the late spring or early summer. Given that El Niño conditions are still present and relatively strong, impacts for the Southern Plains and Oklahoma will remain possible. CPC forecasters see increased odds of above normal precipitation for February and then for each three-month period from March-May through April-June. Those enhanced odds diminish from east to west across Oklahoma as spring unfolds, disappearing from the state as summer begins. Based upon that scenario, CPC's U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook for February through April does not indicate any drought development across Oklahoma. It must be noted, however, that the consensus computer model forecast for the equatorial pacific waters later into fall and winter 2016 is for La Niña to develop. La Niña events can create the opposite of conditions that Oklahoma saw during 2016, with increased odds of a drier and warmer late fall through spring. The La Niña events of 2010-11 and 2011-12 were thought to have aided the beginning of the damaging five-year drought that struck the Southern Plains and Oklahoma from 2010-15. Sea surface temperature forecasts for next fall should be considered very preliminary at this time, but there is historical precedence for a strong El Niño to be followed by La Niña according to climate experts.

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