

Winter Finally Finds December January 4, 2015

Winter was noticeably absent through much of December, a deceptively warm month that ended more than 2 degrees above normal to rank as the 38th warmest since records began in 1895. The season finally lived up to its name during the month's final week, however, with a swath of 3-5 inches of snow along the I-44 corridor in southwestern Oklahoma, along with another icy plunge to ring in the New Year. New Year's Eve was celebrated with patches of freezing drizzle, snow, sleet and below-zero wind chills. Despite the snow and ice, preliminary data from the Oklahoma Mesonet still tracked a deficit of 0.67 inches for the month, the 55th driest December on record. The year itself was cool and dry as a whole, with 2014's statewide average temperature at 58.9 degrees, one degree below normal and the 27th coolest on record. The January-December statewide average precipitation total of 28.47 inches was more than 8 inches below normal and the 26th driest year on record. The 2014 Mesonet precipitation totals ranged from 13.2 inches at Kenton while Clayton had the most with 50.9 inches.

December's average temperature might have finished on the warm side, but that statistic didn't come with lots of warm, sunny days. In fact, it was the least sunny December since Mesonet records began in 1994, receiving only 35 percent of possible sunshine. Fog was a frequent visitor throughout the month, and the high humidity values aided in suppressing fire danger. The clouds and moisture also helped account for the warmth, trapping heat close to the surface at night and preventing the low temperatures from plummeting. The statewide average high temperature, held down by the cloudiness, was actually more than a degree below normal, but the average low temperature was nearly 6.5 degrees above normal. The highest temperature recorded by the Mesonet in December was 75 degrees at Burneyville on the fifth. The lowest temperature, minus 6 degrees, came on the month's final day at Kenton. The lowest temperature of 2014 was minus 12 degrees at Nowata back on January 6, and the highest temperature of 107 degrees came on July 26 at Freedom.

Severe weather made an appearance during the month, including a weak tornado near Lake Arcadia in central Oklahoma on the 14th, only the 25th December tornado since 1950. According to preliminary data from the National Weather Service (NWS), 2014 ended with a total of 16 tornadoes, the lowest count since accurate records began in 1950. If that total holds at 16, it would best the previous minimum count of 17 back in 1988. Large hail and severe winds also accompanied the storms on the 14th.

No drought improvements were noted during the month thanks to the dry conditions. The U.S. Drought Monitor depicted 60 percent of the state in drought to start December and 62 percent as it ended. The amount of extreme-to-exceptional drought, the worst two categories on the Drought Monitor, increased from 18 percent to 22 percent. One year ago, 38 percent of the state was considered to be in drought. Nearly 1.5 million Oklahomans were still affected by drought as the year came to a close.

The latest outlooks for January from the NWS' Climate Prediction Center (CPC) show increased odds of above normal precipitation across the southern two-thirds of the state, but no clear signal for temperature. CPC's U.S. Monthly Drought Outlook for January sees drought persisting or intensifying across those areas where drought is already in place, but no development in the current drought-free areas.

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