

## 2002 Oklahoma Weather In Review

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NORMAN - At first glance, Oklahoma's weather during 2002 may seem a bit mundane. After all, the state's tally of 18 tornadoes is the 2<sup>nd</sup>-lowest annual total – next to 1988's 17 – since accurate record-keeping began in 1950. However, while tornadoes may capture the public's eye more than ice storms and drought, the latter two phenomena plagued the state during 2002 and are often more damaging than all but the most significant tornado outbreaks. Add to this a return of the Dust Bowl days to the Panhandle, the lack of triple-digit temperatures in Oklahoma City, and an October climate that was better suited for Alaska than Oklahoma, and the year in weather was actually anything but ordinary.

The year opened on a rather dubious note as a devastating ice storm cut a swath of destruction across the northwestern half of the state in late January. The ice storm left \$300 million of damage in its wake, leaving some 255,000 residences and businesses without power, including the entire city of Enid and its population of 47,000. Some rural areas of northwestern Oklahoma were without power for up to 2 months. The ice downed over 31,000 power poles, and over 1,500 miles of power lines. The most serious casualty in the wake of the ice storm, however, was the toll in human lives. Seven fatalities were directly attributable to the effects of the late January storm.

A second ice storm struck the same area in early December of 2002, marking it as the 3<sup>rd</sup> significant ice storm to hit Oklahoma in 2 years. Although damages were minor compared to the Christmas storm of 2000 and the January 2002 storm, enough ice accumulation occurred to leave 60,000 homes and businesses without power. Damages were estimated at less than \$10 million as 42 counties were included in a disaster declaration by the Governor's office.

The Panhandle also saw the continuation of its most severe drought outside of the Dust Bowl days during 2002. With its roots begun back in the early-summer of 2001, severe drought conditions actually affected the western half of the state, as 30 counties were declared disaster areas by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, with another 9 being made eligible for federal assistance. Impacts to agriculture in the region were catastrophic as winter wheat and other row crops were destroyed and pasturelands withered in the parched soil. The drought conditions eased and were finally broken during the summer of 2002, but the relief came too late to assuage the economic impacts of the year-long drought. Damages to the state's agricultural industry alone totaled over \$1 billion dollars.

Oklahoma City missed reaching the 100 degree mark for the first time since 1997, and for only the third time since 1990. It neared the triple-digit mark twice when it reached 99 degrees once in July and once in August. The lack of extreme heat helped Oklahoma City record its 7<sup>th</sup> coolest July on record.

Oklahoma's chances for an Indian summer were dashed rather early in October. After a week of above normal temperatures and abundant sunshine to start the month, a shift in the upper-level wind patterns to northwesterly flow allowed a steady series of cold fronts to sweep across the state. Those cold fronts, combined with an influx of upper-level storms from the Four Corners area, plunged the state into a cold, dreary weather pattern for the remainder of the month. The final tallies of October's statewide-averaged temperature and precipitation bear out the miserable nature of the early-Autumn weather. Not only did the state endure its 3rd-coolest October since record-keeping began 1892, but the 17th-wettest occurred as well. To exemplify the gray nature of the month, Oklahoma City experienced fog on 18 of the month's 31 days.

Bolstered by a cold spring and fall, the year will finish as one of the 20 coldest on record. The lowest temperature recorded in the state during 2002 was -8 degrees on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, while the highest of 108 degrees was recorded at Mutual on July 26<sup>th</sup>. And despite the severe drought conditions experienced by a significant portion of the state, statewide rainfall totals finished the year barely below normal.

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