

OKLAHOMA ENJOYS A ‘QUIET’ SPRINGTIME

By Derek Arndt

Assistant State Climatologist

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NORMAN – Although Oklahoma has experienced an active spring severe weather season, Friday will mark a one year milestone since Oklahoma was last struck by what scientists term a strong tornado. The last strong tornado, rated F2 or higher on the Fujita scale, to strike the state cut a 26-mile path across McCurtain County into Texas on May 14, 2003. That tornado capped a week of violent weather, which included the devastating tornadoes on May 8 and 9.

Only twice since 1950 has Oklahoma gone a year or longer without recording a strong tornado. The longest known period was from November 16, 1987 through May 7, 1989 – an incredible streak of 539 days. The other occurrence, April 3, 1994 through April 17, 1995, ran just over a year, at 379 days. Two other recent streaks have also come very close.

The streak from April 1994 to April 1995 had 26 confirmed tornadoes. Although some were quite damaging, none were rated as “strong tornadoes.” The tornadoes caused only two injuries, but more than six million dollars in damage. The streak ended with an outbreak of 16 tornadoes on April 17th, causing more than two million dollars in damage.

From May 27, 1996 through May 24, 1997, Oklahoma went 363 days with only 28 “weak” tornadoes. During that stretch, there were no reported injuries, and only one tornado that caused substantial damage. But quiet periods sometimes end with a bang. Over the next two days, 35 tornadoes struck the Sooner State, the largest of which occurred in Pittsburg County. The storms caused more than 1.5 million dollars in damage and injured three people.

After the two-day outbreak, Oklahoma began another 362-day stretch without strong tornadoes, lasting from May 27, 1997 through May 23, 1998. During the period, 20 weak tornadoes were confirmed, with a total of 4 injuries and an estimated \$277,000 in damages. The streak ended as 16 tornadoes hit Oklahoma on May 24, causing more than two million dollars in damages in a single storm near Lamont. Again, well-prepared Oklahomans escaped without injuries.

The longest known streak without any strong tornadoes was an incredible 539 days, stretching from November 16, 1987 through May 7, 1989. Only 21 tornadoes were confirmed during this nearly eighteen-month period, although several of these tornadoes caused substantial damage and one fatality. Unlike the other streaks, this one did not end with an outbreak, but rather with a single, strong tornado in Delaware County. The remainder of spring 1989 turned out to be almost equally tranquil.

During the current stretch, Oklahoma has recorded more tornadoes than these other streaks, a total of 25 more on May 15th and 16th, 2003 and 19 so far this spring. But like the other streaks, there have been few injuries and no fatalities. How this streak will end, nobody can be sure. But one thing is clear: Oklahomans know what to do when they inevitably do return.

Tornado strength is determined by the damage they produce, rated using the Fujita Scale, which runs from F0 to F5. Strong or violent tornadoes, those rated F2-F5, make up only about one-third of the total number of tornadoes but they claim 99% of lives lost in tornadoes. Those in the upper reaches of the scale, F4 and F5-intensity tornadoes, make up just 2% of the total but cause 67% of deaths. F0 and F1 tornadoes, while much weaker and less threatening to life, are still capable of producing property damage.

Number of Days	Date of last strong tornado	Date on which streak ended
539	November 15, 1987	May 8, 1989
379	April 2, 1994	April 17, 1995
365 +	May 14, 2003	??
363	May 26, 1996	May 25, 1997
362	May 26, 1996	May 24, 1998
350	May 26, 1991	May 11, 1992
310	May 11, 1978	March 18, 1979
308	May 8, 1989	March 13, 1990

Media Contact:

Cerry Leffler
 Oklahoma Climatological Survey
 100 E. Boyd, Suite 1210
 Norman, OK 73019-1012
 405-325-2451
 405-325-2550 (fax)
 cerry@ou.edu

For Additional Information:

Derek Arndt
 Assistant State Climatologist
 100 E. Boyd, Suite 1210
 Norman, OK 73019-1012
 405-325-2541
 405-325-2550 (fax)
 darndt@ou.edu