

Oklahoma Panhandle Revisits Dust Bowl Days

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8/23/02

NORMAN, OK - Drought is unavoidable for those who live in the Oklahoma Panhandle. In a region known for sparse precipitation, long-term weather patterns will occasionally develop that diminish precipitation totals for years at a time. The current drought, whose origins are traced back to June 2001, is classified as “severe” to “extreme” by the NOAA’s Climate Prediction Center. The drought’s impact on the region’s agriculture during 2001-2002 was catastrophic. The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service at Oklahoma State University declared the 2001-2002 Panhandle wheat crop to be one of the smallest in history, as much of the crop never emerged due to the drought conditions. Ranchers were forced into mass sell offs of their cattle due to the lack of forage on pasturelands and shrinking farm ponds.

Data from the Oklahoma Mesonet and NOAA’s National Weather Service indicate that the Panhandle’s precipitation deficit has steadily increased from June 2001 through July 2002 to 11.10 inches, the 2nd-driest such 14-month period since record keeping began in 1895. Only the 1936-1937 period, which occurred at the height of the Dust Bowl, was drier with an 11.68-inch deficit. Of the 12 driest 14-month periods since 1895 that span June-July, six occurred during the Dust Bowl era of the 1930s. The 2001-2002 period is in stark contrast to the previous five corresponding periods from 1996-2001, each of which ended with precipitation surpluses. Three other of the driest June-July periods occurred during the early- to mid-1950s in the midst of yet another long-term drought. The remaining two occurred in 1916-1917 and 1980-1981, the latter of which is memorable for the prolonged heat wave during the summer of 1980. Oklahoma City experienced 50 days with triple-digit temperatures that year, along with the warmest July in its history.

The Panhandle region has received beneficial rainfall this August, according to data from the Oklahoma Mesonet. Panhandle Mesonet stations averaged 2.24 inches of rainfall during the first 22 days of August. Normal rainfall for the entire month is 2.48 inches. Boise City in far-western Cimarron County recorded 2.3 inches on the 20th, while Kenton, Hooker, Beaver, and Buffalo each received rainfall in excess of 1.5 inches on the 9th and 10th of the month.

The Oklahoma Panhandle also has the rather dubious honor of being the birthplace of the term “Dust Bowl”. The phrase, coined in an Associated Press dispatch from Guymon the day after the infamous “Black Sunday” in April 1935, and its imagery have been particularly hard to shake. Popularized by John Steinbeck’s novel “The Grapes of Wrath,” the Dust Bowl will be forever symbolized by the fictional “Joad” family, who abandoned their Oklahoma farm to travel to California – “the land of milk and honey.” However, thanks to soil conservation measures and irrigation techniques implemented following that tumultuous period, the days of vast clouds of dirt sweeping in from Kansas, Texas, or Colorado are long gone. And with proper land use now in effect, the Panhandle region has again become an integral part of the Oklahoma agricultural

community. It is unfortunate that the 14-month period that just ended was catastrophically dry.

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