

What's Going On With This Crazy Weather?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

More than one person in recent weeks has asked me what is going on with this crazy weather. My response has been, it's just typical Kansas weather. Here in Kansas we have what is considered a continental climate. We are in the middle of a large continent away from the moderating influence of large bodies of water, like the oceans. We are essentially subject to whatever weather pattern is moving across the middle of the continent which is what gives rise to the old saying, "If you don't like the weather just wait five minutes, it'll change." While a bit of an exaggeration there is also a fair amount of truth in it.

With that context in mind, let's discuss the past 12 to 14 months of weather. From September 1, 2017 through July 31, 2018 we officially had 15.92 inches of precipitation which is only 55% of normal for that 11 month period. We have reliable rainfall records dating back to 1931 and this period was drier than any equivalent 11 month period in that span. So yes, the drought that we went through was drier than the 1930s or the 1950s. From January 1, 2018 through July 31, 2018 we only had 10.60 inches of rain. Again, basically half of normal for that period!

The weather patterns started changing in late July, thankfully. August had 125% of normal rainfall, September 205% of normal and so far for October, 210% of normal. Famine to feast in very short order. Remember those totals through the end of July? 15.92 inches for the previous 11 months and 10.6 inches for year to date. In the roughly 2½ months since the end of July we have had 17.34 inches of rain or more than the previous 11 months! That is what we can expect from a continental climate. At the rate we are going we could end up with normal annual rainfall, it's just that most of it fell in the final third of the year!

What about last weekend's snowfall then, was that a record setter? We are at a bit of a disadvantage because we don't have good historic snowfall data for Junction City. On October 8, 1992 we did have a trace of snow. On October 9, 1970, Topeka had 0.8 inches of snow and Concordia had 4.6 inches. However, looking at Manhattan weather records we see that they only had a trace in those early snows (records dating back to the late 1800's) when Concordia and Topeka received measurable snowfall. The earliest measurable snowfall in Manhattan is on October 19, 1916 when 2 inches fell. The heaviest October snowfall occurred on October 29, 1917 when 7.5 inches of snow fell. So based on everything taken together, this may be the earliest snowfall at least in recent history.

Is all of this "unusual" weather an indicator of anything? There's truly no way to tell. Weather extremes are an ongoing part of a continental climate. Climate warming will also lead to more extreme weather extremes. In other words you can expect to see longer droughts, higher average temperatures, especially night time temperatures, heavier single storm rainfall events. Records are always meant to be broken and weather records are no different.

We can't change the weather but we do have to be continually looking at ways to moderate or mitigate it's impact on our world. Whether you believe in human induced climate change or not, there are things that we can do to reduce our impact on the planet. We need to take steps to not put ourselves in harms way of floods and other extreme events. We must be prepared for the unexpected because failing to plan, is planning to fail!