

The Catch

HAIL, HAIL, HAIL

FORT COLLINS, CO — Friday, May 20, 2005

It's Hot!

It is hot and dry today with the temperature flirting with the 90-degree mark here in Fort Collins. Some of you are cooler and some of you are hotter, but for many of us this is by far the hottest day so far this year. Hard to believe it was snowing just a few days ago. The first main surge of the high-elevation snowmelt is rolling down the rivers. Out of several hundred precipitation reports received today, almost all said "0.00", but now that we cover so much territory, it's hard for all areas from southern Texas up to the WY-MT border to all be dry at the same time. Sure enough, 3 stations in Wyoming had precip. in the past day. Moose, WY was the wettest with a total of 0.32"

Storm Season

Looking at the calendar, it's May 20. What that tells me after 28 years of tracking our climate is that it's time to hold on to your hat—or wear a hard hat—and hold on tight, because the severe weather season is upon us. This time of year down over New Mexico and southwestern Colorado it usually just starts getting hot and dry, but for the High Plains we're moving into severe weather prime time.

Hail so far

We've had 256 reports of hail so far since April 1st (224 from Colorado)—five of which have had stones of 2" diameter or greater. Curiously, 3 of these reports were from Longmont—the city with the lowest historical frequency of hail along the Front Range. The new website makes it very easy to sort and search for hail, so hit "View Data" at the top of your page and then select "Hail Reports" and just start experimenting.

Hail Pads

Damaged hail pads are streaming into our office now and we are preparing to begin to analyze all of those dents and dings. What fun—well, sort of. Also streaming in have been apologetic e-mails from well-meaning volunteers who either had no hail pads on hand or just forgot to put them out.

So don't let that happen again!! (Although some volunteers in NM, WY and KS have never been equipped with hail pads and don't have a local supply). More hail pads are on the way to surrounding states. Here in Colorado, we've made at least 1500 so far this year and we have sent out or dropped off supplies in most counties. Contact your local coordinator if you need more pads, or visit your designated hail pad distribution center.

There will always be situations when you don't have a hail pad when a storm hits. Still do your best to fill out a hail report on the website, and get it to us pronto as the storm passes on.

Eastern Plains recruiting

From Gillette, WY to Roswell, NM—we need more volunteers on the Plains. The Great Plains are the hail capital of the country and a terribly weather sensitive area. Somehow, these areas are always flirting with disaster—drought, high wind, blizzards, tornadoes, hail—and even floods. While we have dozens of stations across the plains, we could easily use hundreds. In fact, with the population density what it is out there (which is not much) pretty much every living breathing human living on the High Plains could be a CoCoRaHS volunteer and we'd still have some big gaps.

So our challenge is—let's find more volunteers to help us. Let your friends and neighbors know and see if you can sign them up. If you have a farm or ranch that covers a lot of territory, or if your job takes you across wide areas every day, maybe you could even set up a second rain gauge in another location. We actually have several volunteers who maintain more than one gauge.

To help matters along, one of our volunteers here in Colorado has offered a challenge (first of its type in CoCoRaHS history). This individual, who will remain nameless, is offering a reward—a \$100 gift certificate to the restaurant of your choice) to the Colorado volunteer who recruits the most new volunteers here in Colorado between June 1 and September 30. (Sorry to you all in other states—the challenge does not apply to you—but maybe someone will step forward and issue similar challenges for neighboring states.)

We are still working on some of the rules of this contest, but to track it the applicant must mention the name of the person who told them about the project on their application AND they must be trained, equipped and collecting data by September 30th 2005. Also, there will be some priority given to recruiting volunteers that fill the many wide open gaps rather than recruiting your next door neighbor -- although that's OK too. So this should be very fun.

Southern Texas

Not quite sure how this happened, but I now see 2 reports coming in on some days all the way down by San Antonio, TX. I also see one out in eastern Kansas near Kansas City. The network has been growing a lot, too, up in northern Wyoming. For example, Johnson County (the home of Buffalo—famous for a large commercial jet aircraft landing erroneously at its small airport back in 19??) now has 9 active stations. With summer storms on the way, we are going to have a lot to watch, and a lot of opportunities to learn.

Are we learning? What??

Many of you have asked what we hope to learn from this study (which has grown to become a network). In a few weeks, I will try to compile for you a summary of what we have learned so far, what we are hoping to learn, and then just some of the things that precipitation networks are good for in general (like tracking emerging drought conditions or documenting flood-producing storms—such as the monster over Grand Island, NE last week).

By the way, while many areas have enjoyed improved moisture conditions this winter and spring, we do have our eyes on parts of eastern Colorado, NW Kansas and SW Nebraska that really count on spring precipitation but which haven't had much for the past few weeks. Their grasslands and winter wheat crops are surprisingly tolerant and resilient, but sooner or later they need precipitation or "Drought" will be right back in our vocabulary.

Likewise, while it has seemed like there was a lot of snow this winter up in the mountains, the fact is that in many areas it barely reached the average, and some areas never did hit their historic average. So now that snow is melting fast, these areas will dry out quickly, and unless more storms arrive soon, water supplies may be a little short once again. The upper South Platte drainage up around Fairplay and Lake George and also out over near Meeker and in NW Wyoming are all still on the short end of the stick.

Have some fun

I hope you all have a great weekend. I'll be out cleaning ditches this weekend, because our irrigation water is about to arrive. That is always fun.

Nolan