

The Catch

COCORAHS—ON TO 2008

FORT COLLINS, CO — Monday, December 31, 2007

Good evening and Happy New Year!

(This was written last night -- the weather is calming down now) It is warm and cozy here by the Christmas tree this evening. But outside that's a cold wind blowing here in northern Colorado. No new snow has fallen today at our house, but our snow from earlier this week has been swirling and drifting -- and road conditions are nasty. 40 mph winds are no pleasure at any temperature, but I would rather not know the wind chill temperature here or across southern Wyoming tonight. In a few minutes I get to go out to do the evening chores. That will be fun. Why chickens choose this time of year to lose their feathers, I'll never know.

I am happy to report that one of our bolder barn cats got sick and tired of being chased by the yellow Lab we are taking care of for the holidays. She stopped, turned around and lashed the boisterous beast across the nose. The Lab has been easier to manage ever since. Only one week to go!

Fund Raising for CoCoRaHS

Thanks very much to those of you who already decided to make donations to CoCoRaHS. This means a lot to us. We don't want to offend our many volunteers, but we also want CoCoRaHS to be around for many years to come. We appreciate the many suggestions and contacts that some of you sent us. Some feel strongly that the Federal government should help cover the expenses to keep CoCoRaHS going and growing, but others have quite different views. It will take a balance and a team effort, but we'll hopefully begin to figure that out in 2008. For information on how to make contributions to CoCoRaHS:

<http://www.cocorahs.org/Content.aspx?page=donate>

If you know of businesses, organizations, foundations or charitable trusts that might be willing to help CoCoRaHS, please provide me with details and contact information. We'll begin contacting these potential sponsors in the months ahead. Send your suggestions to: nolan@atmos.colostate.edu

CoCoRaHS winter tips and reminders!

Measurement of rainfall is straight forward. Once we have our gauge set up in a good location, we're in business. But then winter comes along. The majority of us have had to measure and report snow or ice in recent weeks. What fun. Considering the cold, the morning darkness, and the challenges of measuring snowfall, depth and water content accurately, I am pleased to report that the quality of our data this winter has been very, very good. Sure, there are a few odd looking data entries, but many of us are beginners and we're getting better. Thanks to so many of you for sticking with us through this tougher time of the year. In a few more days, the mornings will gradually get brighter, and in 6-7 weeks it will start warming up. The worst will soon be over.

Please report the total depth of snow on the ground!!

We're getting better at reporting "New Snow" accumulation, but only about 25% of us are reporting the "Total Snow on Ground" each morning. Let's do better than that. Just because the computer already fills in "NA" doesn't mean we're not interested. Report the average depth of the old snow remaining on the ground even if no new snow has fallen recently. Snow cover is so important, and your measurements of the presence or absence of snow cover during the winter months are greatly needed, even across the states that don't get a lot of snow. If your ground is bare, type in zero (0.0). If the ground is mostly bare but has some patches of snow left, type in T. For the next 2-3 months, lets all report our "Total snow on ground".

"Intense Precipitation Reports" Good Job!

A nice little snow storm is tracking into Michigan this evening. Thanks for all the reports of "Intense Precipitation" today as that storm tracked across northern Illinois and Indiana. Remember, if rain or snow are occurring that you think we and the National Weather Service should know about, use the "Intense Precipitation Report" form. You can report more than once if you need to. Then, go ahead and send in your regular "Daily Precipitation Report" the next morning.

Back on Dec. 8th, 2007 at a time when many of us were struggling with our first major winter storms of the season, I typed up a new set of instructions for measuring and reporting snow and ice. If you have any questions, please go back and read that again.

http://www.cocorahs.org/Content.aspx?page=Catch_Archive07

We also have other instructions on the website that could help.

Some thoughts on the year ending -- 2007

This year had special significance for me. I completed my 30th year on the job here at the Colorado Climate Center at Colorado State University. This has been a great place to work, and a fantastic environment for studying our incredible climate. I am grateful, and I hope to be able to continue to work for many (well, not too many, but several) more years.

For me, the best part of 2007 was working with CoCoRaHS and getting to meet many wonderful people -- in person or via e-mail. I received some very moving notes this past year from some of our volunteers. Some were hilariously funny, and others deeply saddening. Some described health crises recently diagnosed, uncertain futures, lost jobs, lost relationships, and profound disabilities. Others have mentioned the deaths of dear friends and family members. Some have sent heart-felt apologies for why they can no longer take measurements for CoCoRaHS -- maybe ever. I am touched that some of you have chosen to share your personal struggles with me. It makes our "family of weather observers" even stronger.

In so many ways, what we do in CoCoRaHS is trivial compared to the challenges, joys, thrills, necessities and sorrows of life. Yet, what we do is important in its' own small way. I was amazed when on Christmas day over 3,300 of us managed to check our rain gauges and send in our reports. What a commitment!

I love science and always have, but I hate how science can overlook our feelings and our situations. But weather and climate are so connected to our humanity -- affecting what we do and how we feel. Just going outside to check a rain gauge is a simple human action that puts us face to face with nature. The sights, the sounds, and even the smells that change with the weather, all connect us a bit more deeply to the important rhythm of our changing seasons and the steady passing of time.

Maybe it is a strange way to look at life, but every day that we feel good enough to get out of bed, get dressed and take that short little walk out to the rain gauge must be a good day.

Other thoughts about 2007

It was a great year for CoCoRaHS. We added 11 new states and well over 4,000 new observers. A student at the University of Missouri was the 10,000th

individual to sign up to be a part of CoCoRaHS since the project started here in Fort Collins back in 1998. 2007 was the year when instead of saying "CoCoRaHS Who??", instead we began getting calls from all over the country and some foreign lands asking "Can we join too?" We now have volunteers sending in rainfall reports each day from the shores of the Pacific Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, the Atlantic, and most of the Great Lakes. We have volunteers on the Hudson River, the Delaware, the Susquehanna, the Ohio, the Missouri, the Colorado, the Rio Grande, the Columbia and the Mighty Mississippi. I'm learning my geography better than ever, and I hope you are too.

Just last week we passed the 1 million mark for daily precipitation reports in 2007. We received over 1,700 reports of hail and over 1,900 reports of intense rain or snow -- and I know there were a lot more that could have been reported. Maybe next year?

From the time CoCoRaHS began, we knew it was only a matter of time before "The Big One" would hit fill someone's gauge to the top. 2007 was the year, and it happened more than once. On the morning of August 19th, an observer in western Oklahoma awoke to a full gauge (over 11" of rain). This happened again in south central Texas October 16th and near Pensacola, FL three days later on October 19th. In all, there were 6 Days during 2007 where rainfall exceeded 10" in 24 hours somewhere in our network. On 25 different days, rainfall exceeded 7". There was not a single day in 2007 where all of our volunteers found no rain or snow in the gauge.

As we continue to grow and expand into new states, the probability that one of us will happen to be under the next really big storm continues to grow. For better or worse, we'll have this to look forward to in 2008.

Some thoughts on the year ahead -- 2008 here we come

We hold fast to our seemingly impossible but scientifically appropriate goal of eventually having at least one weather station per square mile over densely populated urban and suburban areas and one per 36 square miles (one per township) over rural areas. Imagine how well we would understand storm patterns then. It may take as a few years to get there, but we will continue to press towards that goal.

As we look ahead to 2008, ten states have already secured positions to join CoCoRaHS. Here is the schedule.

January -- Louisiana
February -- New Jersey (starting on Ground Hog Day)
March -- South Carolina
April -- Rhode Island

May -- Georgia
June -- Utah and Washington State
July -- Michigan
August -- Mississippi
October -- California

Other New England states may also slip into the 2008 schedule. We remain on track to have 20,000 observers by 2010.

As we continue to provide very high quality observations of rain, hail and snow, we will soon become one of the best sources for "ground truth" data on rainfall, hail and snow patterns in the country. We are supporting in a very significant way, our nation's primary climate monitoring network -- the National Weather Service Cooperative Observer Network <http://www.weather.gov/om/coop/>

But there are down sides. As we grow and expand nationally, it gets harder and harder for us to provide the personal service you deserve. Now that our Web Developer, Julian, is a proud papa of a young son (soon to be 2 months old), he's less likely to be able to reply to your e-mail day or night like he has the past 4 years. We used to make steady improvements to our website and our educational resources, but now most of our time goes into answering questions and troubleshooting errors. It gets harder and harder for me to write CoCoRaHS messages that are relevant for each state and county. Regardless of the hurdles, we'll do our best. We have many motivated local volunteer leaders who know a lot about the weather of their regions and who will continue to give CoCoRaHS the personal local attention that we all appreciate.

What matters most?? You

When it's all said and done, the most important part of CoCoRaHS is our volunteers. The 5 minutes a day it takes to measure and report the precipitation doesn't sound like much, but when thousands of us do it all across the country -- Wow! That's what makes this project tick.

The chances are that some of us will tire of the CoCoRaHS routine in 2008. Don't feel guilty about it if you are one of the many that "don't quite get around to it" each day. Instead, report when you feel like it and then talk to your neighbors. Maybe there is someone else nearby that would really like to help but just needs to be asked.

- - - And a Happy New Year

This is our wish for all of us in 2008. Make the best of whatever comes your way. . . . and my prediction is that Sept 8th will be the day we hit 8,000 reports.

Nolan

Colorado State University

P.S. If you live in a county where there are several CoCoRaHS observers, maybe you could help organize a local potluck picnic or other informal CoCoRaHS gathering in 2008. We don't give out contact info for our volunteers, but if you help organize it, your local or regional coordinator will help advertise. We love our annual CoCoRaHS picnics here in Colorado and hopefully this tradition will start in other states, too.