

The Catch

COCORAHS – A COLD UPDATE

FORT COLLINS, CO — Sunday, October 11, 2009

Greetings from northern Colorado

For the hundreds of new volunteers who have signed up to join the Community Collaborative Rain, Hail and Snow network during the past month, we welcome you warmly and look forward to your participation in CoCoRaHS.. Your backyard precipitation measurements will be combined with those of many others to map and track precipitation across the country.

We had been enjoying a pleasant early autumn here in Colorado -- but when October arrived our weather took a turn towards the chilly. We've had one hard freeze after another. Despite a cart full of large tarps, our efforts to extend the season for our garden failed and almost everything is frozen. Between hail, a cold summer and hard early freezes, this just wasn't a good year for our garden. In terms of tomatoes, eggplants, peppers and winter squash, we were nearly shut out. The final "exclamation point" arrived Friday evening when a midwinter-like cold front hit like a frozen brick at 6 PM just before the local high school football game kickoff and a few hours ahead of the Colorado State University Homecoming fireworks celebration. In a matter of minutes, the temperatures tumbled into the low 20s, winds gusted to 30 mph along with horizontal snow. Of course, this was the evening we had to unload a truckload of hay for our horses. By 10 PM the temperature was in the teens, and yesterday morning we awoke to 12 degrees F and over 4" of dry, powdery snow. This just doesn't seem right for October 10th. One good thing -- our dogs were thrilled with the snow. Our Australian Shepherd, Lily, now almost 8 months old, has been flying around the yard in circles with her nose in the snow and her feet in the air. Our Great Pyrenees just lies in the snow happy to finally have some comfortable temperatures.

The combination of extreme cold and snow are doing a number on the autumn leaves. They were starting to change color here, but now leaves are turning brown and falling in clouds. Leo (our cat) watched in amazement as nearly every leaf dropped from our ash tree all in a matter of hours. The apple, cottonwood and elm trees are still tightly holding their leaves.

Prepare for winter

This blast of cold weather is a rude reminder that it's time for some of us to get our stations ready for winter. Our gauges work well for measuring the water content of frozen precipitation, but remember to remove the funnel and inner tube prior to snow. Make sure that rain or melted snow is not allowed to freeze inside the inner cylinder. If water freezes in the calibrated cylinder, it may crack and you'll be out of luck. Also, it's about time for reviewing instructions for measuring snow. We have training materials on our website. Look at "Things to Know about Rain, Hail and Snow" and click the "snow" symbol. Snow is much more dynamic and illusive than rain when it comes to measurements, but if we all follow the same guidelines, our data will be consistent. CoCoRAHS has quickly become the most extensive observing network for snow and freezing rain across the country, so give it your best shot.

Decision time:

Cold, snowy weather means that it's decision time for some of us. We're not as young as we used to be and we don't want any of our volunteers slipping on the ice while trying to read a rain gauge. It's OK with us if you take a break from CoCoRaHS during the cold and potentially snowy months ahead. If you want to make sure that your data are complete, but you also want to stay warm, cozy and safe, then consider recruiting a younger and agile neighbor to help out. CoCoRaHS data are important -- but your health and happiness are MUCH MORE important.

Been to Austin, TX

This week past week the U.S. Drought Monitor Forum was held in Austin, Texas. One hundred drought experts from across the country assembled to discuss how to improve drought monitoring, analysis, detection, and early warning. Henry and I both got to participate. If you're not familiar with the U.S. Drought Monitor go to: <http://www.drought.gov>

At least 4 or 5 of the presenters specifically mentioned CoCoRaHS and how it is helping resolve local variations in drought conditions. It is not just our reports of heavy rain, snow and hail that make a difference, but our consistent reporting of dry weather as well that is helping to improve climate monitoring.

There is a very large and enthusiastic group of CoCoRaHS volunteers in the Austin–San Antonio area. Texans have signed up for CoCoRaHS in droves. One thing I’ve learned via CoCoRaHS is that rainfall is variable everywhere, but southern Texas has some of the wildest extremes. Flood and drought always seem to be in view.

Highlights of my first ever trip to Austin, Texas were visiting the state capital building, seeing the beautiful Texas “Hill Country” and attending the first “Texas CoCoRaHS Meet and Greet” sponsored by the Lower Colorado River Authority at their new education center on the shores of Lake Austin. We got to meet several dozen local CoCoRaHS volunteers along with Troy Kimmel, the CoCoRaHS Texas Coordinator, Bob Rose with LCRA who is the local CoCoRaHS coordinator plus several National Weather Service meteorologists. It was a great evening, and we hope to visit Austin again.

The September Survey

The response to the CoCoRaHS September Survey was excellent -- and much better than any of us expected. Out of a pool of around 17,000 who were notified by e-mail, over 7,500 of us took the survey. 93% who started the survey, finished it even though it took close to 15 minutes to complete. I don’t know much about surveys but from what the experts tell us, this was an extremely good response. Thanks so much if you were one of the many who finished it. If not – maybe we’ll do something like this again in a year or two. One thing you can still do is contact me if you have specific suggestions on things we could do to improve the project and provide a better educational experience for participants. Just send me an e-mail with your input with a subject line “CoCoRaHS Survey input”.

Now comes the fun/hard part -- processing the results. We have two volunteers who are working on education-related PhD’s who have volunteered to assist. This is a huge help to us. Within the next 2–3 months we’ll get the results compiled and share them with you. What will be especially interesting will be the many suggestions on how to make CoCoRaHS better. It looks like we have about a thousand pages of suggestions to read ?.

Quest for 9,000

Our Sept 21–23 campaign to reach 9000 CoCoRaHS daily precipitation reports fell short -- but only slightly. We reached 98% of our goal

September 22 was an extraordinary day with 5191 out of 8855 participants reporting measurable precipitation with a nationwide average precipitation of 0.29" for the day. That's a lot of water when summed over the area of our country. Furthermore, several dozen stations, mostly in Colorado, had snow those days -- a very lively start to autumn 2009.

If you were one of the 8800+ who reported -- thanks very much!! If you are interested but have not yet gotten started measuring and reporting for CoCoRaHS it's never too late and it's really quite easy. If you have any questions or need any help, contact your local CoCoRaHS coordinator:

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

or drop us a note at info@cocorahs.org

Water Year Reports

Many have written to ask if we still want and need your 2009 Water Year summary reports. The answer is a resounding "Yes". Send it to: zach@cocorahs.org or to me. We didn't publicize it much this year because our database and server are about maxed out, and we didn't want everybody using the system at the same time.

Here is an example water year summary report format in case you wish to compile one for your station. We've received water year precipitation totals so far ranging from less than 8" up to nearly 70".

WY 2009

Station Name

Station number

Month Pcpn amount # days Snowfall # days Snow # days Hail

Oct 08 0.43 6 0 0 0

Nov 08

Dec 08

Jan 09

Feb 09

Mar 09
Apr 09
May 09
Jun 09
Jul 09
Aug 09
Sep 09

Totals

Desert gauges

We've been very surprised at the interest in CoCoRaHS in Arizona. Since it rains little there compared to much of the country, we thought it might be a difficult challenge to find willing CoCoRaHS volunteers. But we were totally wrong about that. Applications continue to pour in and we already have over 400 new volunteers registered. It may not rain or snow much in AZ, but when it does it will get measured.

Finding errors

We use a system of weather professionals from across the country who volunteer a few hours each week to check over the CoCoRaHS precipitation reports to find, check and, if necessary, correct any data errors. The more skilled eyes we have looking at the maps and precipitation reports each day the better the final data. So if you happen to spot a likely error or typo in our daily precipitation reports (as shown on the maps or reports), then please, please let us know. Just mention the date and the county and we can follow from there.

Goal -- CoCoRaHS volunteers in every county

CoCoRaHS continues to grow. With the addition of Minnesota CoCoRaHS will be nationwide. However, when you look on the CoCoRaHS maps, it's obvious that we still have gaps that make it difficult to track storms and precipitation patterns in some areas.

<http://www.cocorahs.org/Maps/ViewMap.aspx>

We've set a new goal for the 2010 water year. We would like to have at least one active observer in every county. Then we will at least be able to have a reasonable national perspective on precipitation patterns. I think

there are about 3300 counties nationally. We currently have observers in about 2700 (assuming that MN will have volunteers in all counties soon after they join).

We have our work cut out for us to meet this goal. Some of these counties are very rural and some have less than 1000 residents. We could use your help. If you have friends, relatives or other contacts in any of our empty counties across the country, see what you can do to help recruit a new volunteer there. Every month or two I'll keep you posted on our progress. This past week two new counties were represented -- one in Montana and one in Arkansas. If we can add two new counties each week, we'll meet our goal for the year.

Looking West

The summer to winter seasonal transition is well underway now (as evidenced by the snow in my yard). What comes next is the onset of the West Coast rainy season. Sure enough, there is a storm system that threatens to pound parts of California this week. So if you are a CoCoRaHS volunteer in CA, OR, or WA and have not been active during the dry summer season, clean your rain gauge and be ready for storms this week.

Finished

Thanks for your continued interest and involvement in CoCoRaHS. If you've decided that CoCoRaHS is not for you, just drop us a note and we can close your station and/or take you off the mailing list.

Have a fine October,

Nolan Doesken
Colorado State University