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Ask for Climate, You Get Weather

THE TIME to prepare for cold weather is when it is warm. Yet many of us find it hard to concentrate on tire chains and anti-freeze when the temperature is in the 70s. Later, after streets are slick with ice and snow, we may blame the weather for our predicaments.

Major changes in the weather usually revive the notion that our climate is changing. This writer first checked out the idea more than 40 years ago, while a reporter on The Ada News.

At the time, Oklahoma and much of the nation were in the grip of severe drouth that made the existing depression even worse.

Dr. Edson A. MacMillan, a professor at what is now East Central State University, was local weather observer. Together we examined his records, covering less than half a century, looking for signs of a climatic change that might account for the drouth.

It quickly became apparent that everything that was happening in the dry dusty '30s had happened before and might occur again.

In terms of climate, total measured data concerning Oklahoma weather is minimal, covering less than one of the many centuries that sunshine, rain and snow have fallen on this land.

"Climate, to most people, means the average temperature and precipitation of a locality," said Stephen M. Sutherland, University of Oklahoma geography professor, in a recent presentation at Norman. "This concept is misleading. The average may be a rare event."

Sutherland explained that climate also includes atmospheric elements other than temperature and precipitation, such as sunshine, cloud cover, visual range, wind and humidity. It also is important to consider extremes and frequencies of weather phenomena.

Nearly three years ago, a study was launched jointly by the National Defense University, Department of Agriculture and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to try to determine climatic trends.

Answers to a scientific questionaire were obtained from 24 climatologists in seven countries, including statistical reports, scientific observations, and personal opinions.

From these data, five possible climatic scenarios for the year 2000 were constructed, ranging from large global warming to large global cooling. The combined observations "suggest as most likely a climate resembling the average for the past 30 years."

Collectively, the respondents tended to anticipate a slight global warming rather than a cooling.

Respondents also gave fairly strong credence to a 20 to 22 year drouth cycle in the Great Plains but didn't agree on the cause.

Cold or hot, wet or dry, we may expect more of the same. As Dr. Bernice Crockett of Oklahoma Water Inc. says: "Climate is what you want; weather is what you get."

If the compilation of expert opinions in the publication "Climate Change to the Year 2000" is correct, Oklahomans may expect frequent changes in the weather, but our climate will be about the same.