

## ANALYSIS OF FORECAST PERFORMANCE FOR HIT, MISS, AND FALSE ALARM THUNDERSNOW EVENTS DURING ROCS

Katie L. Crandall\* and Patrick S. Market  
*Department of Soil, Environmental, and Atmospheric Science*  
University of Missouri-Columbia  
Columbia, MO

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Thundersnow (TSSN) is a mesoscale event that is typically associated with large amounts of precipitation and both in-cloud and cloud-to-ground lightning. TSSN is most often seen in the northwest and northeast sectors of dynamic mid-latitude cyclones (Market et al. 2002). Starting in 2002, the Research on Convective Snows (ROCS) group began issuing TSSN outlooks each day during the cold season for the area of the United States pictured in Figure 1. The outlooks were issued at 1800 UTC and expired at 1800 UTC the following day. The purpose of the outlooks was to inform users on whether TSSN should be expected in the central U.S. during the ensuing 24-hour period and for what location, if applicable. The issuance of daily outlooks continued for five seasons from 2003 through 2008. Although these TSSN outlooks had been issued for some time, there has never been any significant verification performed on these forecasts. This paper will look at three different TSSN events and determine the reasons for either a successful or unsuccessful forecast.

### 2. METHODOLOGY

Of the events selected for analysis, three are chosen for further discussion in this paper. Each event had a different forecast outcome; and either fell into the category of being a “hit” forecast, a “missed” forecast, or a “false alarm” forecast. There is another category of outcomes called “correct rejections”, but those cases consist of a forecast of no TSSN with no TSSN occurring. A “hit” forecast means that the forecasters predicted TSSN and TSSN did occur. The “hit” case occurred on 01 December 2006.

		TSSN Observed	
		Yes	No
TSSN Forecast	Yes	A	B
	No	C	D

Table I:  $2 \times 2$  contingency table for TSSN events: Table entry “A” indicates “hit” forecasts, table entry “B” indicates “false alarm” forecasts, table entry “C” indicates “missed” forecasts, and table entry “D” indicates “correct rejections”.

A “false alarm” forecast means that the forecasters predicted TSSN would occur and TSSN did not occur. The “false alarm” case occurred on 20 January 2007. Finally a “missed” forecast means that the forecasters predicted that no TSSN would occur and TSSN did occur. The “missed” case occurred on 13 February 2007. Table I shows the standard  $2 \times 2$  contingency table (SWPC 2007) that was employed for the verification of these TSSN events. It is important to note, too, that the emphasis on the analyses that follow is on the assessment of stability. In each of the cases examined, sufficient moisture and adequate forcing for ascent were present to generate clouds and precipitation. Therefore, a careful examination of the thermodynamic profiles (e.g., Brown 1993; Market et al. 2006) in each event is the key, to understanding why a given atmosphere did (or did not) become unstable and create convection.

### 3. DATA

Data for the analysis of lightning in the TSSN cases came from a National Lightning Detection Network feed provided by Vaisala, Inc. The thermodynamic profiles were assessed using output from the Rapid Update Cycle (RUC) initial fields, which had been thinned to a 40-km grid (widely available in real-time when the forecasts were being created). As such, we are making an assumption that the soundings from the

\*Corresponding author: Katie L. Crandall, University of Missouri-Columbia, 302 Anheuser-Busch Natural Resources Building, Columbia, MO 65211. e-mail: [kcmn5@mail.missouri.edu](mailto:kcmn5@mail.missouri.edu)

RUC initial fields are the best available representation of the sounding profiles for the stated times and locations.

## 4. ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Case Study Analysis (01 December 2006)

For the “hit” case that occurred on 01 December 2006 the TSSN outlook was created on 30 November 2006 at 1800 UTC and expired on 01 December 2006 at 1800 UTC. The outlook included a graphic that identified the location of any TSSN for the next 24 hours (Figure 2) and a written forecast discussion (not shown). Figure 2 indicates to the user that TSSN was forecasted to occur in a swath from extreme north Texas to Michigan. Figure 3 depicts the actual snowfall amount after the TSSN event for the forecast area. Figure 4 depicts lightning strikes associated with snowfall at the beginning of the event. Figure 5 depicts lightning strikes associated with snowfall during the peak of the event.

The area of focus for the “hit” case was Jefferson City, MO (KJEF). The surface analysis (Figure 6) shows a surface low located to the southeast of Missouri. Temperatures were right on the cusp between sleet development and snow development, but later sounding analysis depicts colder temperatures for snow formation. Q vector divergence (Figure 7) shows that there is adequate forcing for accent. Figure 8 shows the relative humidity from 950 to 500 millibars (mb) (in Figures 8, 15, and 22 captions indicate that relative humidity is from 1000 to 500 mb, but it is actually from 950 to 500 mb) and indicates that moisture is plentiful for the forecast location.

The sounding profiles for KJEF are shown in figures 9(a), 9(b), and 9(c). Figure 9(a) is a sounding from 0400 UTC on 01 December 2006 and depicts the starting of a good TSSN sounding. Lapse rates are starting to increase and winds at lower levels are turning with height from the southeast to the northwest. Fig. 9(b) shows a sounding from 0600 UTC on 01 December 2006. This is the period where TSSN is occurring. The sounding shows a similar profile to figure 9(a), but with steeper lapse rates which indicate greater instability. Figure 9(c) shows the event wrapping up and decreasing lapse rates.

### 4.2 Case Study Analysis (20 January 2007)

The “false alarm” case was forecasted from 1800 UTC on 19 January 2007 to 1800 UTC on 20 January 2007. TSSN was expected to occur in northern Texas and the majority of Oklahoma (Figure 10). Figure 11 is the map of the snowfall that actually occurred from the event. For this event we must look at the written

forecast discussion to understand why the forecasters thought that TSSN would occur in northern Texas and Oklahoma:

“...Once this system enters the main jet core in the southern plains, it is progged to spread into the central US by 18Z on the 20<sup>th</sup> bringing with it the chance of additional snowfall. Ample moisture coupled with strong forcing and **freezing temperatures develop over Northern Texas and Southern Oklahoma by late day 1... Soundings from northern Texas and Southern Oklahoma show temperature profiles within the desired 0 C to -10 C temp range** for lightning production with saturated profiles and strong omega (-16 ub/s) values. Cross sections from HHF to LBF in northern TX reveal a well saturated atmosphere with regions of elevated (700-500 mb) CSI surrounded by additional CI and PI... However, once the system is influenced by the low level jet pumping additional moisture in from the Gulf, and with all the other necessary elements present in this system, some lightning activity in the cold air is possible.”

Figure 12 depicts lightning strikes associated with snowfall at the beginning of the event. From figure 12 it is apparent that no lightning was observed in the forecast area. The focus area for the “false alarm” event was Wichita Falls, TX (KSPS). The surface analysis (Figure 13) depicts lower surface pressure in the southwestern United States near Arizona and New Mexico. Figure 14 shows Q vector divergence and indicates adequate forcing for accent. Figure 15 shows relative humidity from 950 to 500 mb. As with the “hit” event there was ample moisture for TSSN to occur.

For this event the *hourly* sounding profiles were taken from KSPS and are depicted in figures 16(a), 16(b) and 16(c). Hourly soundings are shown, as the 1900 UTC dataset (to make a 1500-1700-1900 UTC 2-hourly time series) was not available. Figure 16(a) is the 20 January 2007, 1600 UTC sounding. The sounding shows some decent veering with height of the lower winds, marginal lapse rates, but the big problem is that the sounding is a sleet sounding not a snow sounding. Figure 16(b) is the 20 January 2007, 1700 UTC sounding from the event and even though there is a small amount of convective available potential energy (CAPE), the sounding is still too warm for snow production. Figure 16(c) finishes out the stability profile for this event with the sounding from 20 January 2007, 1800 UTC. There is no longer any CAPE and the sounding remains too warm. Another problem with this

event is that the soundings are stable in the preferred lightning region decreasing the chance for lightning production.

#### 4.3 Case Study Analysis (13 February 2007)

The final event is the “missed” event that was forecasted for 1800 UTC on 12 February 2007 to 1800 UTC 13 February 2007. TSSN was not expected to develop anywhere in the specified area of figure 17 (Figure 17 is the outlook graphic for the event). We must again look at the written forecast discussion to understand why the forecasters made the decision that TSSN would not occur.

“...These dynamics, however, are all confined to the warm sector of the system with the 5400 thickness gradient extending from Kansas through northern Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. **The majority of instability for this system also seems to remain confined to the southern portion of this system where rain will be the only type of precipitation.** A few pockets of moisture with adequate forcing are present in IA between 06 - 12Z Tues, but a closer look at soundings in the area indicate weak vertical velocities (less than 5 ubars/sec) and lapse rates of only 4.5 C/km.”

Figure 18 shows the snowfall map which indicates what areas actually experienced TSSN, even though it was not forecasted. Figure 19 depicts lightning strikes associated with snowfall at the beginning of the event.

For the “missed” event the focus was the Olathe, KS (KIXD) area. Surface analysis (Figure 20) shows a strong low pressure center located near the borders of Colorado, Texas, and New Mexico. As with the other two events, Q vector divergence in Figure 21 shows good forcing for ascent, and 950mb to 500mb relative humidity in Figure 22 shows decent moisture.

Sounding profiles for this event were taken from KIXD (Figures 23(a), 23(b) and 23(c)) and valid at the time of the event. Figure 23(a) is the first sounding of interest for 13 February 2007. The time of the sounding is 0200 UTC. The sounding shows very steep lapse rates and temperatures cold enough for snow production. The sounding from 13 February 2007 at 0400 UTC (Figure 23(b)) shows even greater lapse rates, temperatures still cold enough for snow production, and even a slight amount of CAPE. The final sounding is from 13 February 2007 with a time of 0600 UTC (Figure 23(c)). This sounding still shows good temperatures and lapse rates, but there is no longer any CAPE.

## 5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the three forecast cases, moisture and forcing were all present, and the associated extratropical cyclones were dynamic in nature. The forecast outcomes were dictated by the stability of the systems. The “hit” forecast case developed the way it was predicted. Model outcomes were correct and interpreted correctly. Stability analysis showed that TSSN would occur and it did. The “false alarm” forecast case was just too warm for snow to occur. Sleet fell instead, which was indicated by the RUC soundings. Also, the atmosphere was too stable in the preferred lightning region for TSSN. The reason for the error by the ROCS forecasters was that model runs were showing colder temperatures in the forecast region than actually occurred. Finally the “missed” forecast case had model runs indicating weak lapse rates in the forecast area, so ROCS forecasters did not issue an outlook for TSSN. CAPE was present at one time during the event, temperatures were cold enough for snow development, and lapse rates were steeper compared to earlier model output. These conditions along with the presence of moisture and upward vertical motion lead to the development of TSSN.

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## FIGURES

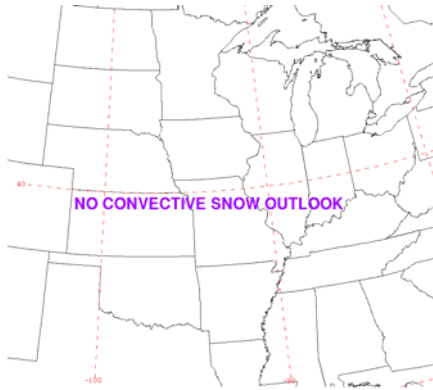


Figure 1: Indicates the region that the ROCS group created TSSN outlooks.

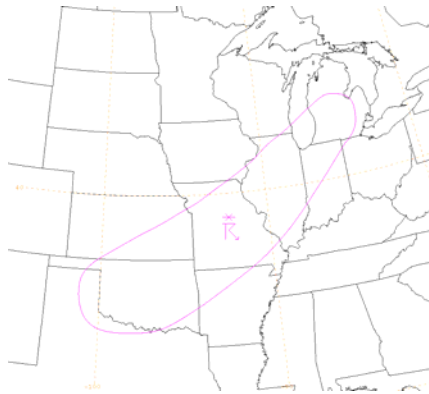


Figure 2: Indicates the location of forecasted TSSN from 1800 UTC on 30 November 2006 to 1800 UTC on 01 December 2006.

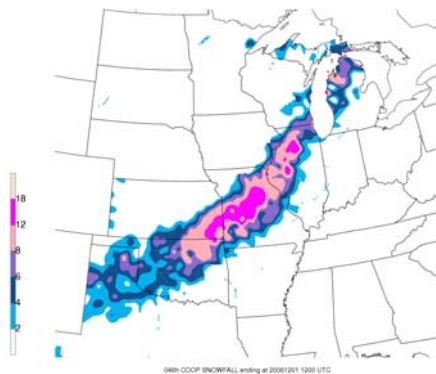


Figure 3: Snowfall map (inches (in)) ending at 01 December 2006 at 1200 UTC

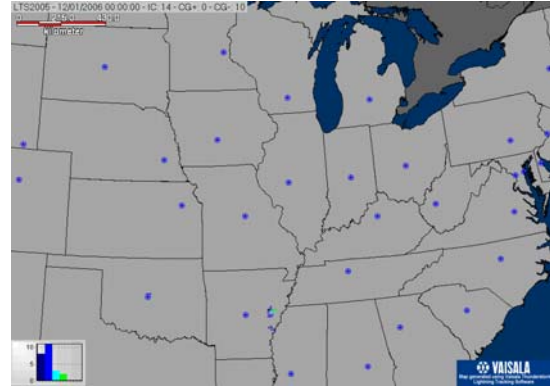


Figure 4: In-cloud (denoted by a dot) and cloud-to-ground (denoted by a negative or a positive sign) lightning strikes for 01 December 2006 at 00 UTC

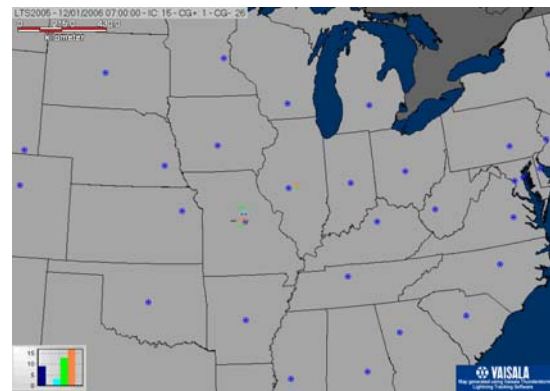


Figure 5: In-cloud (denoted by a dot) and cloud-to-ground (denoted by a negative or a positive sign) lightning strikes for 01 December 2006 at 0700 UTC

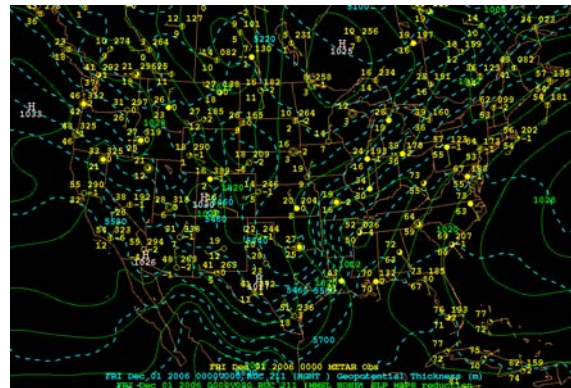


Figure 6: Surface analysis with METAR observations (yellow), geopotential thickness (m (meters), dashed blue line) and mean sea level pressure (mb, solid green line) for 01 December 2006 at 00 UTC

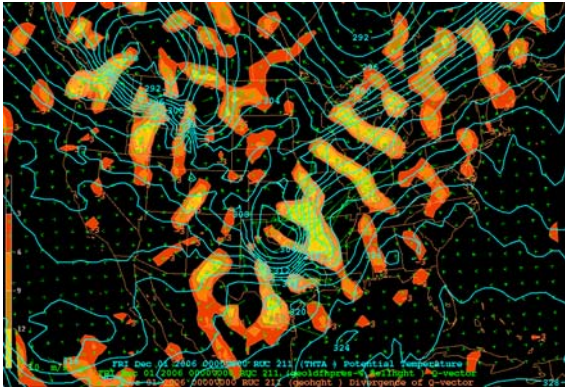


Figure 7: Q vector divergence (kilopascals per meter squared per second ( $\text{kPa m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$ ), solid and filled), Q vectors (green arrows) and Potential Temperature ( $\theta$ ; solid blue line, Kelvin (K)) for 01 December 2006 at 00 UTC

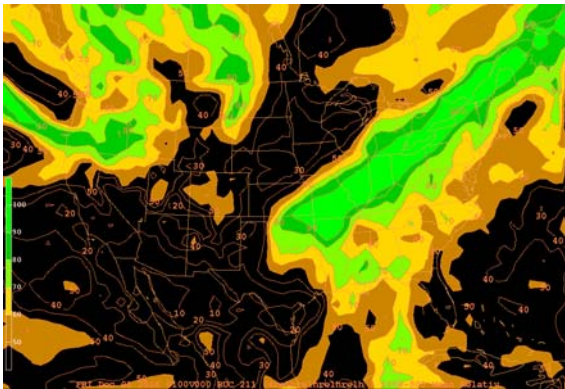


Figure 8: Relative Humidity (%), solid and filled) from 950 mb to 500 mb for 01 December 2006 at 00 UTC

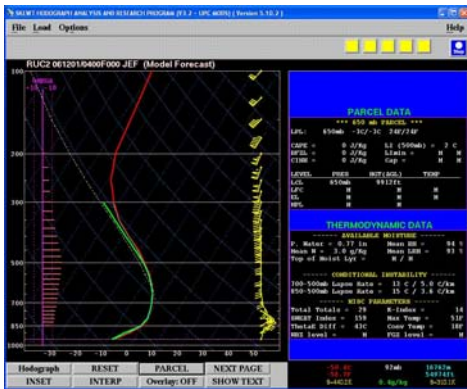


(b)



(c)

Figure 9: RUC model forecast soundings for Jefferson City, MO (KJEF) valid on 01 December 2006 at (a) 0400 UTC, (b) 0600 UTC, and (c) 0800 UTC



(a)



Figure 10: Indicates the location of forecasted TSSN from 1800 UTC on 19 January 2007 to 1800 UTC on 20 January 2007





(b)



(c)

Figure 16: RUC model forecast soundings for Wichita Falls, TX (KSPS), valid on 20 January 2007 at (a) 1600 UTC, (b) 1700 UTC, and (c) 1800 UTC.

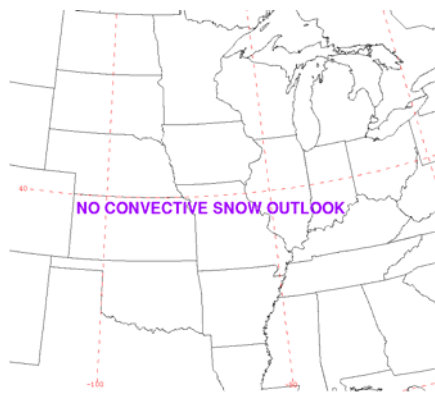


Figure 17: The no convective snow outlook from 1800 UTC on 12 February 2007 to 1800 UTC on 13 February 2007

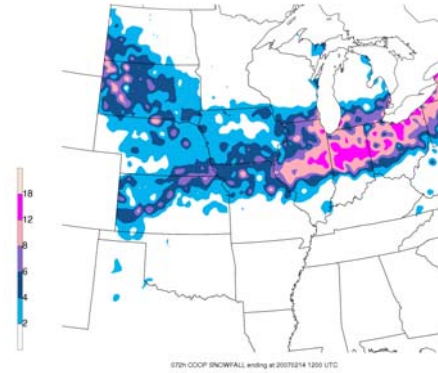


Figure 18: Snowfall map (in) ending on 14 February 2007 at 1200 UTC

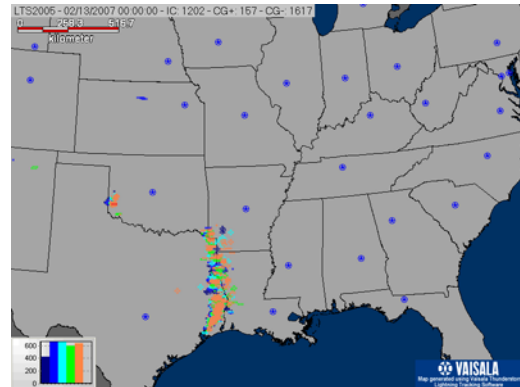


Figure 19: In-cloud (denoted by a dot) and cloud-to-ground (denoted by a negative or a positive sign) lightning strikes for 13 February 2007 at 00 UTC

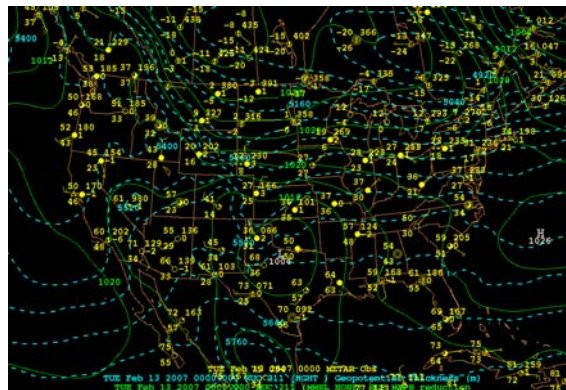


Figure 20: Surface analysis with METAR observations (yellow), geopotential thickness (m, dashed blue line) and mean sea level pressure (mb, solid green line) for 13 February 2007 at 00 UTC

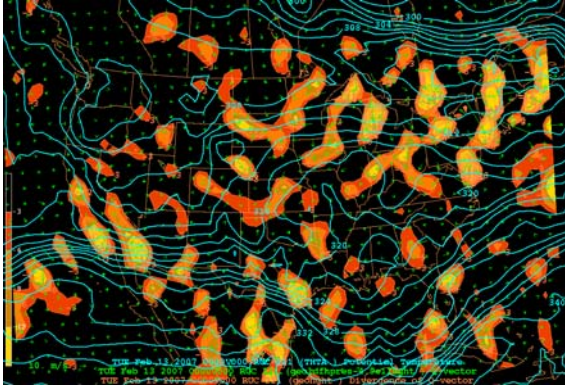


Figure 21: Q vector divergence ( $\text{kPa m}^2 \text{s}^{-1}$ , solid and filled), Q vectors (green arrows) and Potential Temperature ( $\theta$ ; solid blue line, K), for 13 February 2007 at 00 UTC.

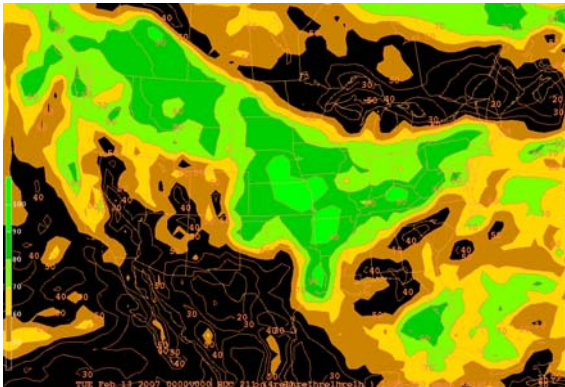


Figure 22: Relative Humidity (% , solid and filled) 950 mb to 500 mb for 13 February 2007 at 00 UTC



(b)



(c)

Figure 23: RUC model forecast soundings for Olathe, KS (KIXD), valid on 13 February 2007 at (a) 0200 UTC, (b) 0400 UTC, and (c) 0600 UTC.



(a)