What’s a Corridor, and Where Exactly is the Metro Area? 
Geographic Descriptors and Hazardous Weather Communication

The National Weather Service (NWS) Forecast Office in Norman has been involved in several different projects to help better understand the regional geographies of the area it serves and the critical role that one’s sense of place plays in weather information consumption and understanding, and in turn how this impacts decision-making processes. This effort began in 2012 with NWS Norman’s partnership with Kim Klockow-McClain and Randy Peppler to better understand central Oklahoma residents’ perception of local tornado risk hot and cool spots. This ongoing work has provided a unique opportunity to reach out to those the NWS serves to better understand place-based perceptions and to enhance communication.

Meteorologists and others communicating weather information often use geographic descriptors to define an area of ongoing or expected weather. The most common of these in the NWS Norman area of responsibility are the “Oklahoma City metro area”, the “Interstate 35 corridor”, the “Interstate 40 corridor”, and the “Interstate 44 corridor”.

As an example, between January 1, 2016 and April 7, 2017, NWS Norman used the term “Oklahoma City Metro Area” or “OKC Metro Area” 134 times on Twitter and 62 times on Facebook. In some cases, forecasters would add additional geographic qualifiers such as “west side of the metro area” or “SE OKC Metro.”

In Spring 2017, prompted by questions received via social media, NWS Norman began an informal study to understand how people conceptualize regional geographic terms commonly used in weather communication. We informally polled emergency managers in central Oklahoma, television meteorologists in the Oklahoma City market, and NWS Norman meteorologists to get their personal interpretations of those terms. At the same time, we did a similar informal poll on the office’s Facebook page to gather thoughts on how others personally define the Oklahoma City metro area.

This presentation will detail the results of the geographic terms study and review ways NWS Norman is working to integrate concepts of regional geography and place-based risk perception into its hazardous weather messaging and outreach activities. This integration hopes to enhance the quality of its decision support services and improve its abilities to communicate in ways that are understood and relevant.