

## WINTER STORMS

### BACKGROUND

A winter storm can range from a moderate snow over a period of a few hours to blizzard conditions with blinding wind-driven snow that lasts for several days. Some winter storms may be large enough to affect several states, while others may affect only a single community. Many winter storms are accompanied by low temperatures and heavy and/or blowing snow, which can severely impair visibility.

In Hampton Roads, winter storms typically include snow, sleet, freezing rain, or a mix of these wintry forms of precipitation. Sleet—raindrops that freeze into ice pellets before reaching the ground—usually bounce when hitting a surface and do not stick to objects; however, sleet can accumulate like snow and cause a hazard to motorists. Freezing rain is rain that falls onto a surface with a temperature below freezing, forming a glaze of ice. Even small accumulations of ice can cause a significant hazard, especially on roads, power lines and trees. Ice storms have also occurred in the region, when freezing rain falls and freezes immediately upon impact.

Communications and power in the region can be disrupted for days, and even small accumulations of ice may cause extreme hazards to motorists and pedestrians. Perhaps one of the most common impacts of winter storms in the region is vehicle accidents and stranded, disabled vehicles. Unaccustomed to driving in snow and ice much of the year, drivers attempt to drive at normal speeds despite deteriorated road conditions. Lacking the large fleets of snowplows of some counties and municipalities further north, the region's secondary roads are not cleared as often or as quickly, and roads may remain unplowed or untreated for many days. This impacts persons with disabilities and others who may become housebound by severe winter storms. Most of the airports in the region also shut down for some time until the runways can be cleared.

Recent winter storms in the region have caused severe economic disruption with lengthy school and business closures, damage to vehicles and reduced community services for extended periods. In agricultural portions of the study area such as Southampton County, freezing temperatures may affect agricultural production, depending on when the event occurs relative to the growing periods of certain crops. Nor'easters often cause winter storms in the region, so the impacts of coastal flooding and shoreline erosion are also associated with winter storm events.

NCEI is now producing the Regional Snowfall Index (RSI) for significant snowstorms that impact the eastern two-thirds of the United States. The RSI is a regional snowfall impact scale that uses the area of snowfall, the amount of snowfall, and the number of people living within a snowstorm. Since the index uses population information, it attempts to quantify the societal impacts of a snowstorm. RSI has been calculated for large snowstorms back to 1900 and therefore the index puts a particular event into a century scale historical perspective (**Table 4.12**). A Category 5 snowstorm is a very rare event while Category 0 and 1 snowstorms are quite typical.



*A VDOT snowplow plows I-64 East.*

*Source: Photo by Tom Saunders, VDOT*

**TABLE 4.12: REGIONAL SNOWFALL INDEX (RSI)**

CATEGORY	RSI RAW SCORE	APPROXIMATE PERCENT OF STORMS	DESCRIPTION
5	>18	1%	Extreme
4	10-18	2%	Crippling
3	6-10	5%	Major
2	3-6	13%	Significant
1	1-3	25%	Notable

Source: NCEI, 2021

RSI is calculated for specific regions. Only the snowfall within a particular region is used to calculate the index for that region. The Hampton Roads study area is within the Southeast study region for the RSI. The RSI differs from other indices because it includes population, which ties the index to societal impacts. Currently, the index uses population based on the 2000 Census.

Where available, the RSI value for specific storms is provided in the History section below.

## SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL EVENTS

According to the NCEI, Hampton Roads has experienced 23 significant winter storm events including snow and ice storms, since 1995 (**Table 4.13**). These events account for \$20.15 million in reported property damages for the affected areas. The region received presidential disaster declarations from major winter storms in 1996 (the Blizzard of '96) and 2000. Some of the most significant winter storms to impact the region in the twentieth century are discussed below.

On **January 30-31, 1966**, a blizzard struck Virginia and the Northeast U.S. It was the second snowstorm to hit Virginia in a week. The first storm dumped nine inches in Norfolk. With fresh snow on the ground, arctic air settled in and temperatures dropped into the teens. The second storm dumped one to two feet of snow over a large part of the state. Intense winds and drifting snow continued and kept roads closed for several days after the storm. Temperatures dropped into the single digits with some falling below zero. Wind chill temperatures were dangerously low.

The **winter of 1976-1977** was the coldest winter on the East Coast of the past century. Storms across the state dropped a few more inches every few days to keep a fresh coating on the streets that were just clearing from the previous storms. The average temperature for the month of January in Norfolk was 29.2°F which was 12° below normal. The prolonged cold wave caused oil and natural gas shortages and President Carter asked people to turn thermostats down to conserve energy. The major elements of this winter were the cold temperatures. There was little snowfall associated with this winter in the region.

The **"Presidents Day Storm"** of February 1979 dropped seven inches on snow on Norfolk on February 18-19 and 13 inches of snow were recorded for the entire month. The following winter, 20 inches fell in Virginia Beach and a foot of snow fell in Norfolk in a storm that hit the region in February. On March 1, another foot of snow fell in Norfolk and the total snowfall amount of 41.9 inches for Norfolk was the snowiest winter ever recorded in eastern Virginia.

The **"Superstorm of March '93,"** was also known as **"The Storm of the Century"** for the eastern United States, due to its large area of impact, all the way from Florida and Alabama through New England. Impacts in the Southside Hampton Roads region were not as severe, but this storm still caused major disruption across a large portion of the country.

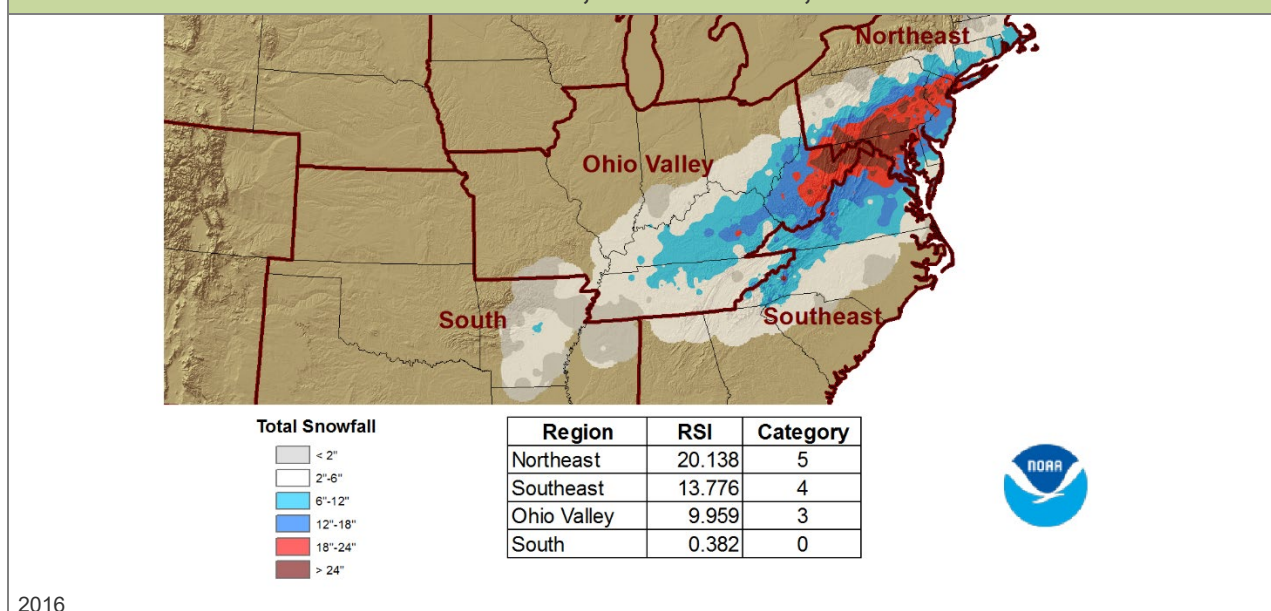
The “**1996 Blizzard**” from January 6 to January 13, 1996 affected much of the eastern seaboard. In Virginia, the winter storm left up to 36 inches of snow in portions of the state. In the Southside Hampton Roads region, most of the communities saw at least a foot of snow between January 6 and January 12.

A major ice storm at the end of **December 1998** resulted in approximately 400,000 customers being without power during the maximum outage period. Some customers were without power for about ten days during the holidays. Many accidents occurred due to slippery road conditions, especially bridges and overpasses and holiday travel. Many secondary roads were impassable due to fallen tree limbs or whole trees.

The **winter of 2010** was a memorable one for residents of Hampton Roads. The NWS winter climate data for 2010-2011 at Norfolk, indicate an average temperature of 38.9 degrees, or 3.2 degrees lower than the normal of 42.1 degrees. Total snowfall was 21.8 inches, which is remarkable when compared to the normal of 7.1 inches for an average winter. December 2010 was the 2<sup>nd</sup>-snowiest on record, at 17.8 inches, because most snow fell before January 1. There was 13.4 inches of snow for December 26, which is the fourth-biggest daily snowfall on record.<sup>6</sup> The December 26 winter storm created havoc on the roadways. Between midnight and 10 pm December 26, State Police recorded 421 traffic crashes, 296 disabled vehicles and 1,159 total calls for service in Hampton Roads, Eastern Shore, Williamsburg, Franklin and Emporia. The RSI ranking for the December, 2010 winter storm was a Category 2.

The **January 22-24, 2016 Winter Storm** was historic in its proportions across the northeastern United States and even in some parts of Virginia, with at least one reported death in Henry County, Virginia. From northern Virginia and into the panhandles of West Virginia and Maryland, and northeastward to the New York City area, historic amounts of snow fell, much of it blowing and drifting in the high winds. Power outages, storm damage and injuries were extreme in some areas. However, in Hampton Roads the storm’s snowfall totals were merely noteworthy and not crippling, with the highest totals of 7.5 inches in James City County and 4 to 7 inches in Surry County. **Figure 4.20** shows the Regional Snowfall Index categories for the storm and how the categories varied across the various regions used in the indexing tool.

**FIGURE 4.20: REGIONAL SNOWFALL INDEX, JANUARY 22-24, 2016**



Similarly, the snowstorm of **December 8-9, 2018** saw snowfall totals of almost two feet in parts of southwestern Virginia, but the accumulated snowfall in Hampton Roads ranged from virtually none in Virginia Beach and Chesapeake to 8.8 inches in Toano on the upper Virginia Peninsula.

<sup>6</sup> Source: *The Daily Press*, 3/11/2011, and NWS).

**TABLE 4.13: WINTER STORM AND NOR'EASTER ACTIVITY (1995 - 2021)**

DATE OF OCCURRENCE	TYPE OF EVENT	PROPERTY DAMAGE	DETAILS	RSI CATEGORY
1/6/1996	Winter Storm	\$25,000	No description available.	5
2/2/1996	Winter Storm	\$0	A winter storm tracked northeast from the Gulf Coast states to off the Virginia coast. It spread a mixture of snow, sleet and some freezing rain from the lower Chesapeake Bay southwest into south central Virginia. Snow developed on the back side of the storm with snow accumulations across Tidewater ranging from 4 to 8 inches.	2
2/16/1996	Winter Storm	\$0	A storm tracked northeast from western South Carolina Thursday night to off the North Carolina coast Friday morning. Then it moved off north and spread heavy snow across Virginia.	
3/7/1996	Winter Storm	\$0	A low pressure area developed over the Carolinas and then tracked off Virginia coast. It spread light snow across central and eastern Virginia.	
12/23/1998	Ice Storm	\$20,000,000	A major ice storm affected central and eastern Virginia from Wednesday into Friday. A prolonged period of freezing rain and some sleet resulted in ice accumulations of one half inch to one inch in many locations. The heavy ice accumulations on trees and power lines caused widespread power outages across the region. Approximately 400,000 customers were without power during the maximum outage period. Some customers were without power for about ten days. Many accidents occurred due to slippery road conditions, especially bridges and overpasses. Many secondary roads were impassable due to fallen tree limbs or whole trees.	
1/19/2000	Winter Storm	\$0	Two to three inches of snow fell overnight as an area of low pressure passed south of the region. The highest amounts were measured along a line from Caroline county in the north, through the City of Richmond, then along the southern shore of the James River to near the Newport News area. Snow briefly fell heavily after midnight, creating hazardous driving conditions.	1
1/25/2000	Winter Storm	\$70,000	A significant winter storm dropped 8 to 12 inches of snow across portions of eastern Virginia. There was blowing and drifting of snow from winds which gusted over 40 mph at times. The snow mixed with sleet and freezing rain occasionally during the late morning hours. In Isle of Wight County, strong winds pushed the Pagan River onto South Church Street. Isle of Wight County snowfall totaled 7 to 8 inches. Winds gusting over 50 mph created some blowing snow in the late afternoon and evening hours. Eighty-four automobile accidents were reported during the storm in Virginia Beach alone. Portions of Interstate 264 were closed. Moderate beach erosion was experienced, especially in the Sandbridge area. Blowing sand closed portions of Sandfiddler Road. The U.S. Coast Guard rescued four crew members of a vessel four miles west of Cape Charles when their craft was caught in dangerously rough seas.	3
12/3/2000	Winter Storm	\$50,000	A winter storm struck parts of extreme southern and southeastern Virginia. The storm affected a relatively small area, but the areas that had snow received some hefty totals. Windsor reported 4 inches of snowfall. Local law enforcement agencies reported scores of accidents, several of which involved injuries. Schools were closed the following day in Suffolk, Franklin and Isle of Wight County.	

**TABLE 4.13: WINTER STORM AND NOR'EASTER ACTIVITY (1995 - 2021)**

DATE OF OCCURRENCE	TYPE OF EVENT	PROPERTY DAMAGE	DETAILS	RSI CATEGORY
2/22/2001	Winter Storm	\$0	A winter storm produced 1 to 4 inches of snow across south central and eastern Virginia. Local law enforcement agencies reported numerous accidents, some of which involved injuries. Many schools were dismissed early on the day of the storm, and several schools in the area were either closed or had a delayed opening the following day due to slippery road conditions.	
1/2/2002	Winter Storm	\$0	A winter storm produced 8 to as much as 12 inches of snow across south central and southeast Virginia. Local law enforcement agencies reported numerous accidents. Most schools in the area were closed Thursday and Friday due to very slippery road conditions.	
12/4/2002	Winter Storm	\$0	A winter storm produced 1 to 4 inches of snow along with 1/4 to 1/2 inch of ice from south central Virginia northeast through the middle peninsula and Virginia northern neck. Numerous trees and power lines were reported down due to ice accumulations, resulting in scattered power outages. Local law enforcement agencies also reported numerous accidents. Some schools in the area were closed Thursday due to slippery road conditions.	
1/16/2003	Winter Storm	\$0	A winter storm produced 4 to 8 inches of snow across portions of central and eastern Virginia. Local law enforcement agencies reported numerous accidents. Most schools in the area were closed Friday due to very slippery road conditions.	
2/15/2003	Winter Storm	\$0	A winter storm produced 1 to 3 inches of snow, along with sleet and 1/4 to 1/2 inch of ice accumulation, across central and eastern Virginia. Local law enforcement agencies reported numerous accidents. Most schools in the area were closed Monday due to very slippery road conditions.	3
1/9/2004	Winter Storm	\$0	Two to as much as five inches of snow fell across portions of central, south central, and southeast Virginia. The snow produced very slippery roadways, which resulted in several accidents.	
1/25/2004	Winter Storm	\$0	Two to as much as four inches of snow and sleet fell across portions of eastern and southeast Virginia. The snow and sleet produced very slippery roadways, which resulted in numerous accidents and school closings for a few days.	
2/15/2004	Winter Storm	\$0	One to three inches of snow fell across portions of south central and southeast Virginia. The snow produced very slippery roadways, which resulted in several accidents and school closings for a few days.	
12/26/2004	Winter Storm	\$0	A winter storm produced a narrow band of six to as much as fourteen inches of snow across the Virginia Eastern Shore, Hampton Roads, and interior southeast Virginia. The snow caused very hazardous driving conditions, which resulted in numerous accidents. Smithfield in Isle of Wight county reported 12 inches and Isle of Wight reported 11 inches.	
1/30/2010	Winter Storm	\$0	Low pressure moving off the coastal Carolinas produced between five and fifteen inches of snow across central and eastern Virginia from Friday night, January 29th, into Saturday night January 30th.	2
12/25/2010	Winter Storm	\$0	Low pressure moving north just off the Mid Atlantic Coast produced between five and sixteen inches of snow across central and eastern Virginia from Saturday afternoon, December 25th, into Sunday evening December 26th. Snowfall amounts were generally between nine and fourteen inches across the region. Chesapeake reported 13.0 inches of snow.	2



**TABLE 4.13: WINTER STORM AND NOR'EASTER ACTIVITY (1995 - 2021)**

DATE OF OCCURRENCE	TYPE OF EVENT	PROPERTY DAMAGE	DETAILS	RSI CATEGORY
1/21/2014	Winter Storm	\$0	Coastal low pressure intensifying off the Mid Atlantic Coast produced a widespread two to five inches of snowfall from the Virginia Piedmont to the Virginia Eastern Shore.	
1/28/2014	Winter Storm	\$0	Coastal low pressure intensifying off the Mid Atlantic Coast produced widespread snowfall ranging from two to ten inches of snowfall from the Virginia Piedmont to the Virginia Eastern Shore. Highest snowfall amounts were over southeast Virginia.	1
2/16/2015	Winter Storm	\$0	Low pressure moving from the Southern Plains east northeast and off the Mid Atlantic Coast produced between four inches and nine inches of snow across central, south central and eastern Virginia from Monday afternoon, February 16th through early Tuesday morning, February 17th.	1
2/26/2015	Winter Storm	\$0	Intensifying low pressure tracking from the Gulf of Mexico northeast and off the southeast and Mid Atlantic coast produced between three inches and nine inches of snow across eastern and southeast Virginia from late Wednesday night, February 25th into midday Thursday, February 26th.	
1/22/2016	Winter Storm	\$0	Strong Low Pressure moving from the Southeast United States northeast and off the Mid Atlantic Coast produced between two and seven inches of snow and strong winds across the Virginia Eastern Shore, Middle Peninsula, and Interior Southeast Virginia. Sedley reported 5.0 inches of snow. City of Franklin reported 5.0 inches of snow. Courtland reported 4.0 inches of snow. Lightfoot had 7.5 inches of snow.	4
1/3/2018	Winter Storm	\$0	Strong low pressure tracking northward just off the East Coast produced between three inches and fourteen inches of snow across Eastern Virginia. Snowfall totals ranged between four inches and nine inches across the county. Newport News reported 7.5 inches of snow. Fort Eustis reported 5.0 inches of snow.	1
1/17/2018	Winter Storm	\$0	Low pressure tracking from the southeast United States northeast and off the Mid Atlantic Coast produced between two inches and seven inches of snow across south central and southeast Virginia. Snowfall totals ranged between two inches and three inches across the county. Bowers Hill reported 3.1 inches of snow.	
12/9/2018	Winter Storm	\$0	Low pressure tracking northeast just off the southeast and Mid Atlantic coasts produced snowfall totals between three inches and fourteen inches across central, south central, and eastern Virginia. Snowfall totals generally ranged between four inches and nine inches across the county. Toano reported 8.8 inches of snow. Five Forks reported 6.5 inches of snow. Norge reported 6.0 inches of snow.	3
2/20/2020	Winter Storm	\$0	Low pressure tracking from the Gulf Coast States east northeast and off the Southeast Coast produced snowfall totals between two inches and five inches across south central and southeast Virginia. Snowfall totals ranged from two inches to five inches across the county. Downtown Suffolk reported 4.0 inches of snow.	
<b>28 Events</b>		<b>\$20,145,000</b>		

Source: NCEI, May, 2021

## PROBABILITY OF FUTURE OCCURRENCES

Winter storms remain a likely occurrence for the region. While storms will be more likely to produce small amounts of snow, sleet or freezing rain, larger storms, though less frequent in occurrence, could also impact the region.

Historical evidence indicates that the region has been impacted by varying degrees of snow storms and ice storms over the last century. In terms of receiving measurable snowfall, the NCEI estimates that there is between 83.3 and 89.8 percent probability that the Southside Hampton Roads region will receive measurable snowfall in any given year, **Table 4.14**.

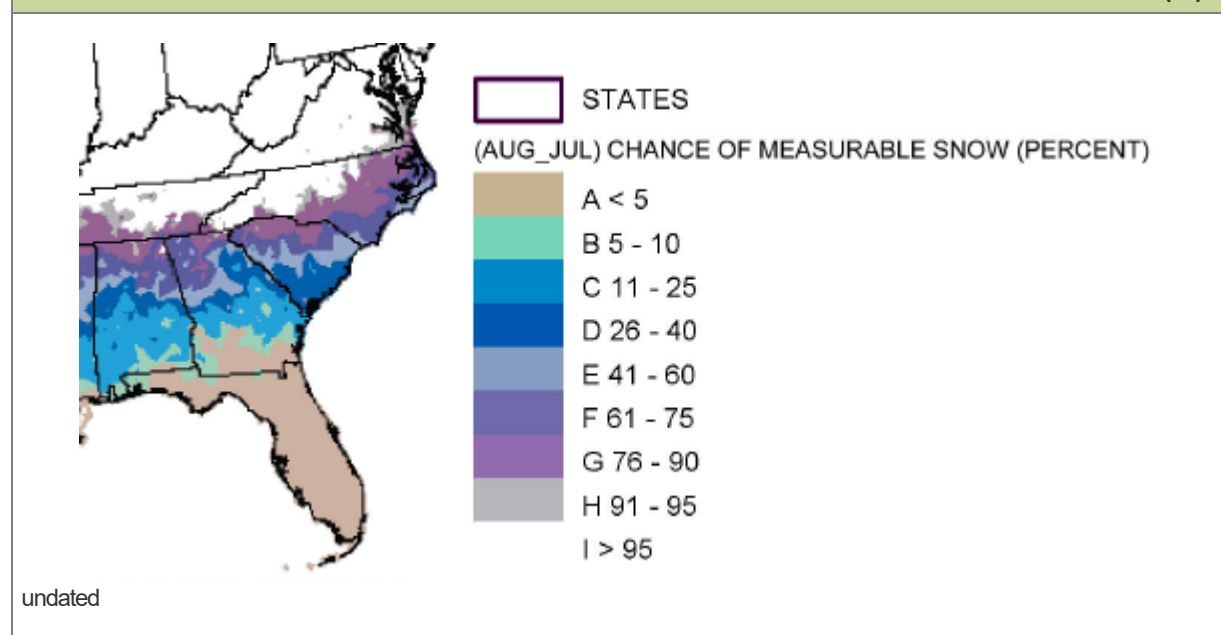
**TABLE 4.14: PROBABILITY OF RECEIVING A MEASURABLE SNOWFALL**

JURISDICTION	ANNUAL PROBABILITY	WINTER PROBABILITY	SPRING PROBABILITY	FALL PROBABILITY
Isle of Wight	83.3%	94.1%	25.0%	4.0%
Norfolk	89.8%	88.7%	36.4%	5.5%
Suffolk	No data	90.0%	63.6%	29.1%
Virginia Beach	84.0%	85.7%	23.5%	2.7%

Source: NOAA, (formerly) National Climatic Data Center, *Snow Climatology Page*, 2011

**Figure 4.21** provides graphic evidence that the chance of snow annually is close to or equal to 100 percent in the rest of the study area.

**FIGURE 4.21: CHANCE OF MEASURABLE SNOWFALL IN SOUTHEAST UNITED STATES (%)**



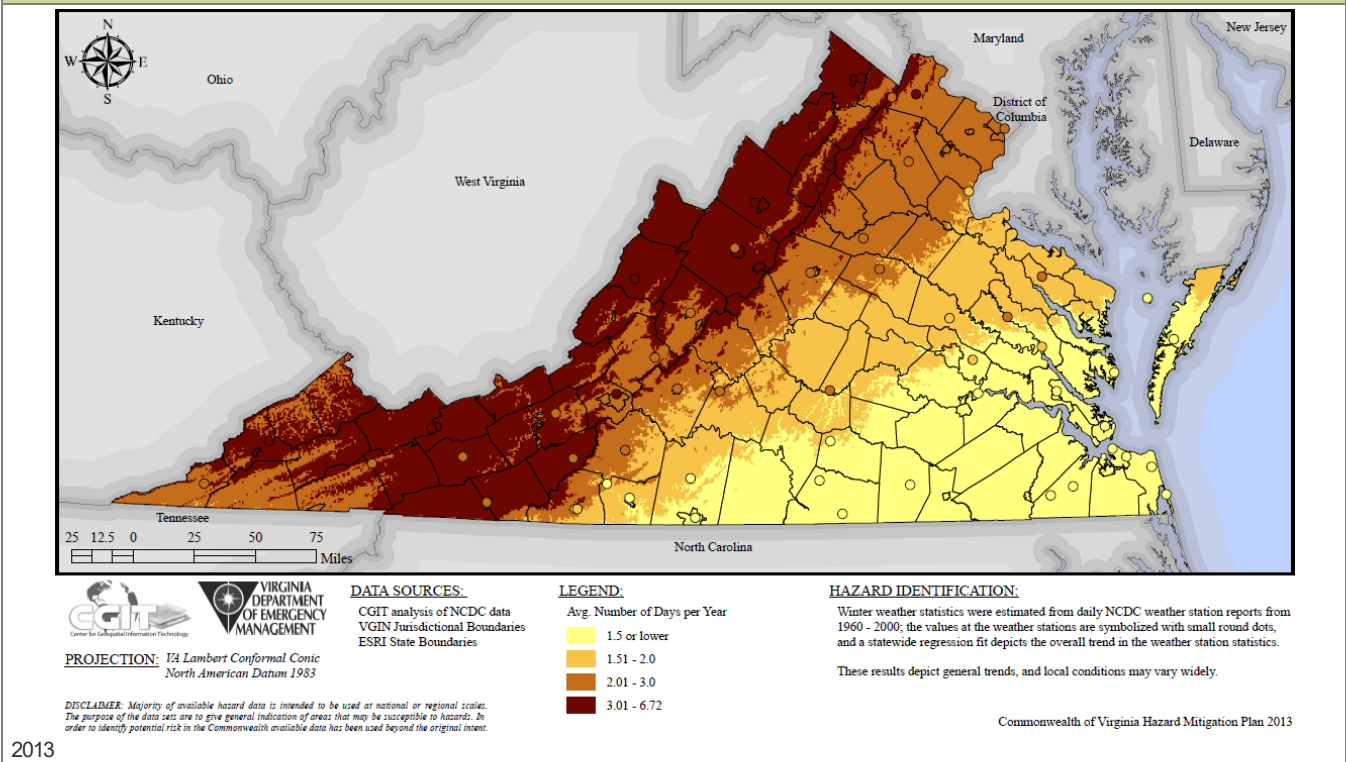
Source: NC State University, *Climate Education web page*: <http://climate.ncsu.edu/edu/k12/SEPrecip>

**Figure 4.22** indicates the average number of days the region will experience three or more days with at least three inches of snow. Data produced for the 2013 *Commonwealth of Virginia Hazard Mitigation Plan* indicate the following frequency characteristics about winter storm characteristics for the region:

- 1.5 or fewer days per year with at least three inches of snow;
- 0.5 or fewer days per year with at least six inches of snow; and,

- three or fewer days per year entirely at or below 32°F.

**FIGURE 4.22: AVERAGE NUMBER OF DAYS WITH AT LEAST THREE INCHES OF SNOW**



2013  
Source: 2013 Commonwealth of Virginia Hazard Mitigation Plan