

Lower-than-expected D.C. snowfall total raises questions about its measurement

By [Angela Fritz](#) and [Shawn Boburg](#) January 24 at 5:55 PM



Snow removal is underway at Ronald Reagan National Airport. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

It's not that 17.8 inches of snow wasn't enough.

But the number that will go down in the history books as Washington's official total — recorded at Reagan National Airport — is downright paltry compared with some other spots in the region, raising the question: Why the disparity?

The reason, it turns out, may be partly due to the improvised technique used by a small team of weather observers at the airport who lost their snow-measuring device to the elements midway through the blizzard. It was buried by the very snow it was supposed to measure.

The mix-up, some say, may have kept the blizzard of 2016 from [breaking into the region's top three snowstorms on record](#), based on accumulations. It has also brought into focus the mechanics of how snow depth is counted and has prompted the National Weather Service to announce it will look into the procedures used at the airport.

Mark Richards, senior weather observer at National, stood by the accuracy of the reading Sunday, saying his team did the best it could under tough conditions. But he acknowledged that the team had to abandon the standard measuring process when they lost the tool typically used to tally totals, called a snow board.

“We would like it to be as accurate as possible,” Richards said. “... But it’s an inexact science. Everyone has to understand that measuring snow in a blizzard is a tough thing to do.”

Susan Buchanan, a National Weather Service spokeswoman, said Sunday that the agency would assemble a team Monday to conduct a “comprehensive assessment of how snow measurements are taken” at National and other locations. She said the agency would make suggestions after its review.

[\[In detail: How much snow fell in the Washington, D.C., region\]](#)

The National Weather Service has clear guidelines on how to measure snowfall for one simple reason: Snowstorms have a huge effect on the economy, life and property. They cost millions of dollars. How much snow falls may determine whether additional relief is sent into a location after a major storm.