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(Reuters) - Sales at U.S. retailers increased less than expected in January amid weak receipts at building material and restaurant outlets, a government report showed on Tuesday, likely reflecting the drag from snow storms that slammed large parts of the country during the month.

A gauge of manufacturing in New York State climbed in February to its highest level in eight months, helped by a rise in inventories, the New York Federal Reserve said in a report on Tuesday. The New York Fed's Empire State general business conditions index increased to 15.43 in February, the best since June and up from 11.92 in January.

KEY POINTS: * Total retail sales rose 0.3 percent, the Commerce Department said, advancing for a seventh straight month. Sales for December were slightly revised down to growth of 0.5 percent from a previously reported 0.6 percent. * Economists polled by Reuters had expected retail sales to increase 0.6 percent last month. Compared to January last year sales were up 7.8 percent.

COMMENTS:

CHARLES BOBRINSKOY, VICE CHAIRMAN, ARIEL INVESTMENTS LLC, CHICAGO:

"The retail sales were a little disappointing, particularly because the general trend for retailers has been positive, with more people outperforming than disappointing recently. The question is, how much of this was weather related? Investors always hate when people point to the weather, but in this case there may be some validity to that. So I'd say the market is a little disappointed, as am I, but I'd put it down as one bad number in a generally strong set of economic numbers."

BERNARD BAUMOHL, CHIEF GLOBAL ECONOMIST, THE ECONOMIC OUTLOOK GROUP LLC, PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY:

"Gasoline played a big role in January and may continue to do so in February because prices have not come down. We have to watch over the next several months whether high gasoline will act as a tax that affects consumer spending in other discretionary and non-discretionary areas.

"Weather this January certainly played a role in a slowdown in consumer spending.

"The bottomline is that Americans are continuing to ramp up spending. That continues to be encouraging.

"Retail sales are already at record high level even after the year-end holiday shopping is over. This is a further sign that consumers are more comfortable with spending."

CHRIS RUPKEY, CHIEF FINANCIAL ECONOMIST, BANK OF TOKYO/MITSUBISHI UFJ:

"Spending was somewhat slower, but it didn't fall off a cliff. Seventy percent of the country was covered by snow in January so, if anything, it's a miracle the consumer didn't just hibernate. But they were out, and sales were still in the positive column so it's not like what happened last year in May and June when spending declined during the European debt crisis.

"Excluding gasoline, building materials and cars, spending bounced back a little from December. But the rate is clearly slowing from the peak in November when consumers were really out in force. It's been slowing a little since then. Gasoline prices are picking up here and that often takes spendable income away from consumers, but at the moment spending is holding up. It could have been worse."

GARY THAYER, CHIEF MACRO STRATEGIST, WELLS FARGO ADVISORS, ST. LOUIS MISSOURI:

"The retail sales were soft, a little weaker than expected, probably hurt by the weather. Consumer spending picked up last fall and it's still growing, just at a slower pace. It will probably pick up again in spring after they get over their cabin fever. The Empire State index was not quite as strong as it was early last year, but it's still solid, reflecting that manufacturing is probably still leading the recovery."

YELENA SHULYATYEVA, U.S. ECONOMIST, BNP PARIBAS, NEW YORK:

RETAIL SALES: "At first glance, it's weaker than expected. The core retail sales number was revised down in December and could have implication for Q4 GDP. High oil and food prices contributed to the most of the gains. Overall it's not strong report."

N.Y. FED "EMPIRE" DATA: "It rose in line with expectations. The manufacturing sector continues to expand even with the inventory (re-stocking) cycle over."

DAVID SLOAN, ECONOMIST, IFR ECONOMICS, A UNIT OF THOMSON REUTERS:

"(After strong spending in late 2010) something of a pause in real spending could have been expected in Q1, particularly with rising gasoline prices causing concern. Still, with the introduction of the payroll tax holiday likely to outweigh the hit from gasoline on real disposable income in Q1, the current consumer slowdown is most likely to be simply a pause, with momentum likely to resume as weather gets back to normal."

MARKET REACTION: STOCKS: U.S. stock index futures edge lower BONDS: U.S. bond prices pare losses FOREX: The dollar trims gains versus yen