

# EXPLANATION OF STAGE- AND WATER-DISCHARGE RECORDS

## Data Collection and Computation

The base data collected at gaging stations consist of records of stage and measurements of discharge of streams or canals, and stage, surface area, and volume of lakes or reservoirs. In addition, observations of factors affecting the stage-discharge relation or the stage-capacity relation, weather records, and other information are used to supplement base data in determining the daily flow or volume of water in storage. Records of stage are obtained from a water-stage recorder that is either downloaded electronically in the field to a laptop computer or similar device or is transmitted using telemetry such as GOES satellite, land-line or cellular-phone modems, or by radio transmission. Measurements of discharge are made with a current meter or acoustic Doppler current profiler, using the general methods adopted by the USGS. These methods are described in standard textbooks, USGS Water-Supply Paper 2175, and the Techniques of Water-Resources Investigations of the United States Geological Survey (TWRIs), Book 3, Chapters A1 through A19 and Book 8, Chapters A2 and B2, which may be accessed from <http://water.usgs.gov/pubs/twri/>. The methods are consistent with the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) standards and generally follow the standards of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO).

For stream-gaging stations, discharge-rating tables for any stage are prepared from stage-discharge curves. If extensions to the rating curves are necessary to express discharge greater than measured, the extensions are made on the basis of indirect measurements of peak discharge (such as slope-area or contracted-opening measurements, or computation of flow over dams and weirs), step-backwater techniques, velocity-area studies, and logarithmic plotting. The daily mean discharge is computed from gage heights and rating tables, then the monthly and yearly mean discharges are computed from the daily values. If the stage-discharge relation is subject to change because of frequent or continual change in the physical features of the stream channel, the daily mean discharge is computed by the shifting-control method in which correction factors that are based on individual discharge measurements and notes by engineers and observers are used when applying the gage heights to the rating tables. If the stage-discharge relation for a station is temporarily changed by the presence of aquatic growth or debris on the controlling section, the daily mean discharge is computed by the shifting-control method.

The stage-discharge relation at some stream-gaging stations is affected by backwater from reservoirs, tributary streams, or other sources. Such an occurrence necessitates the use of the slope method in which the slope or fall in a reach of the stream is a factor in computing discharge. The slope or fall is obtained by means of an auxiliary gage at some distance from the base gage.

An index velocity is measured using ultrasonic or acoustic instruments at some stream-gaging stations, and this index velocity is used to calculate an average velocity for the flow in the stream. This average velocity along with a stage-area relation is then used to calculate average discharge.

At some stations, the stage-discharge relation is affected by changing stage. At these stations, the rate of change in stage is used as a factor in computing discharge.

At some stream-gaging stations in the northern United States, the stage-discharge relation is affected by ice in the winter; therefore, computation of the discharge in the usual manner is impossible. Discharge for periods of ice effect is computed on the basis of gage-height record and occasional winter-discharge measurements. Consideration is given to the available information on temperature and precipitation, notes by gage observers and hydrologists, and comparable records of discharge from other stations in the same or nearby basins.

For a lake or reservoir station, capacity tables giving the volume or contents for any stage are prepared from stage-area relation curves defined by surveys. The application of the stage to the capacity table gives the contents, from which the daily, monthly, or yearly changes are computed.

If the stage-capacity curve is subject to changes because of deposition of sediment in the reservoir, periodic resurveys of the reservoir are necessary to define new stage-capacity curves. During the period between reservoir surveys, the computed contents may be increasingly in error due to the gradual accumulation of sediment.

For some stream-gaging stations, periods of time occur when no gage-height record is obtained or the recorded gage height is faulty and cannot be used to compute daily discharge or contents. Such a situation can happen when the recorder stops or otherwise fails to operate properly, the intakes are plugged, the float is frozen in the well, or for various other reasons. For such periods, the daily discharges are estimated on the basis of recorded range in stage, prior and subsequent records, discharge measurements, weather records, and comparison with records from other stations in the same or nearby basins. Likewise, lake or reservoir volumes may be estimated on the basis of operator's log, prior and subsequent records, inflow-outflow studies, and other information.

## Data Presentation

The records published for each continuous-record surface-water discharge station (stream-gaging station) consist of five parts: (1) the station manuscript or description; (2) the data table of daily mean values of discharge for the current water year with summary data; (3) a tabular statistical summary of monthly mean flow data for a designated period, by water year; (4) a summary statistics table that includes statistical data of annual, daily, and instantaneous flows as well as data pertaining to annual runoff, 7-day low-flow minimums, and flow duration; and (5) a hydrograph of discharge.

### Station Manuscript

The manuscript provides, under various headings, descriptive information, such as station location; period of record; historical extremes outside the period of record; record accuracy; and other remarks pertinent to station operation and regulation. The following information, as appropriate, is provided with each continuous record of discharge or lake content. Comments follow that clarify information presented under the various headings of the station description.

**LOCATION.**—Location information is obtained from the most accurate maps available. The location of the gaging station with respect to the cultural and physical features in the vicinity and with respect to the reference place mentioned in the station name is given. River mileages, given for only a few stations, were determined by methods given in "River Mileage Measurement," Bulletin 14, Revision of October 1968, prepared by the Water Resources Council or were provided by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

**DRAINAGE AREA.**—Drainage areas are measured using the most accurate maps available. Because the type of maps available varies from one drainage basin to another, the accuracy of drainage areas likewise varies. Drainage areas are updated as better maps become available.

**PERIOD OF RECORD.**—This term indicates the time period for which records have been published for the station or for an equivalent station. An equivalent station is one that was in operation at a time that the present station was not and whose location was such that its flow reasonably can be considered equivalent to flow at the present station.

**REVISED RECORDS.**—If a critical error in published records is discovered, a revision is included in the first report published following discovery of the error.

**GAGE.**—The type of gage in current use, the datum of the current gage referred to a standard datum, and a condensed history of the types, locations, and datums of previous gages are given under this heading.

**REMARKS.**—All periods of estimated daily discharge either will be identified by date in this paragraph of the station description for water-discharge stations or flagged in the daily discharge table. (See section titled Identifying Estimated Daily Discharge.) Information is presented relative to the accuracy of the records, to special methods of computation, and to conditions that affect natural flow at the station. In addition, information may be presented pertaining to average discharge data for the period of record; to extremes data for the period of record and the current year; and, possibly, to other pertinent items. For reservoir stations, information is given on the dam forming the reservoir, the capacity, the outlet works and spillway, and the purpose and use of the reservoir.

**COOPERATION.**—Records provided by a cooperating organization or obtained for the USGS by a cooperating organization are identified here.

**EXTREMES OUTSIDE PERIOD OF RECORD.**—Information here documents major floods or unusually low flows that occurred outside the stated period of record. The information may or may not have been obtained by the USGS.

**REVISIONS.**—Records are revised if errors in published records are discovered. Appropriate updates are made in the USGS distributed data system, NWIS, and subsequently to its Web-based national data system, NWISWeb (<http://water.usgs.gov/nwis/nwis>). Users are encouraged to obtain all required data from NWIS or NWISWeb to ensure that they have the most recent data updates. Updates to NWISWeb are made on an annual basis.

Although rare, occasionally the records of a discontinued gaging station may need revision. Because no current or, possibly, future station manuscript would be published for these stations to document the revision in a REVISED RECORDS entry, users of data for these stations who obtained the record from previously published data reports may wish to contact the USGS Water Science Center (address given on the back of the title page of this report) to determine if the published records were revised after the station was discontinued. If, however, the data for a discontinued station were obtained by computer retrieval, the data would be current. Any published revision of data is always accompanied by revision of the corresponding data in computer storage.

Manuscript information for lake or reservoir stations differs from that for stream stations in the nature of the REMARKS and in the inclusion of a stage-capacity table when daily volumes are given.

## Peak Discharge Greater than Base Discharge

Tables of peak discharge above base discharge are included for some stations where secondary instantaneous peak discharge data are used in flood-frequency studies of highway and bridge design, flood-control structures, and other flood-related projects. The base discharge value is selected so an average of three peaks a year will be reported. This base discharge value has a recurrence interval of approximately 1.1 years or a 91-percent chance of exceedence in any 1 year.

## Data Table of Daily Mean Values

The daily table of discharge records for stream-gaging stations gives mean discharge for each day of the water year. In the monthly summary for the table, the line headed TOTAL gives the sum of the daily figures for each month; the line headed MEAN gives the arithmetic average flow in cubic feet per second for the month; and the lines headed MAX and MIN give the maximum and minimum daily mean discharges, respectively, for each month. Discharge for the month is expressed in cubic feet per second per square mile (line headed CFSM); or in inches (line headed IN); or in acre-feet (line headed AC-FT). Values for cubic feet per second per square mile and runoff in inches or in acre-feet may be omitted if extensive regulation or diversion is in effect or if the drainage area includes large noncontributing areas. At some

stations, monthly and (or) yearly observed discharges are adjusted for reservoir storage or diversion, or diversion data or reservoir volumes are given. These values are identified by a symbol and a corresponding footnote.

### Statistics of Monthly Mean Data

A tabular summary of the mean (line headed MEAN), maximum (MAX), and minimum (MIN) of monthly mean flows for each month for a designated period is provided below the mean values table. The water years of the first occurrence of the maximum and minimum monthly flows are provided immediately below those values. The designated period will be expressed as FOR WATER YEARS \_\_-\_\_, BY WATER YEAR (WY), and will list the first and last water years of the range of years selected from the PERIOD OF RECORD paragraph in the station manuscript. The designated period will consist of all of the station record within the specified water years, including complete months of record for partial water years, and may coincide with the period of record for the station. The water years for which the statistics are computed are consecutive, unless a break in the station record is indicated in the manuscript.

### Summary Statistics

A table titled SUMMARY STATISTICS follows the statistics of monthly mean data tabulation. This table consists of four columns with the first column containing the line headings of the statistics being reported. The table provides a statistical summary of yearly, daily, and instantaneous flows, not only for the current water year but also for the previous calendar year and for a designated period, as appropriate. The designated period selected, WATER YEARS \_\_-\_\_, will consist of all of the station records within the specified water years, including complete months of record for partial water years, and may coincide with the period of record for the station. The water years for which the statistics are computed are consecutive, unless a break in the station record is indicated in the manuscript. All of the calculations for the statistical characteristics designated ANNUAL (see line headings below), except for the ANNUAL 7-DAY MINIMUM statistic, are calculated for the designated period using complete water years. The other statistical characteristics may be calculated using partial water years.

The date or water year, as appropriate, of the first occurrence of each statistic reporting extreme values of discharge is provided adjacent to the statistic. Repeated occurrences may be noted in the REMARKS paragraph of the manuscript or in footnotes. Because the designated period may not be the same as the station period of record published in the manuscript, occasionally the dates of occurrence listed for the daily and instantaneous extremes in the designated-period column may not be within the selected water years listed in the heading. When the dates of occurrence do not fall within the selected water years listed in the heading, it will be noted in the REMARKS paragraph or in footnotes. Selected streamflow duration-curve statistics and runoff data also are given. Runoff data may be omitted if extensive regulation or diversion of flow is in effect in the drainage basin.

The following summary statistics data are provided with each continuous record of discharge. Comments that follow clarify information presented under the various line headings of the SUMMARY STATISTICS table.

ANNUAL TOTAL.—The sum of the daily mean values of discharge for the year.

ANNUAL MEAN.—The arithmetic mean for the individual daily mean discharges for the year noted or for the designated period.

HIGHEST ANNUAL MEAN.—The maximum annual mean discharge occurring for the designated period.

LOWEST ANNUAL MEAN.—The minimum annual mean discharge occurring for the designated period.

HIGHEST DAILY MEAN.—The maximum daily mean discharge for the year or for the designated period.

LOWEST DAILY MEAN.—The minimum daily mean discharge for the year or for the designated period.

ANNUAL 7-DAY MINIMUM.—The lowest mean discharge for 7 consecutive days for a calendar year or a water year. Note that most low-flow frequency analyses of annual 7-day minimum flows use a climatic year (April 1-March 31). The date shown in the summary statistics table is the initial date of the 7-day period. This value should not be confused with the 7-day 10-year low-flow statistic.

MAXIMUM PEAK FLOW.—The maximum instantaneous peak discharge occurring for the water year or designated period. Occasionally the maximum flow for a year may occur at midnight at the beginning or end of the year, on a recession from or rise toward a higher peak in the adjoining year. In this case, the maximum peak flow is given in the table and the maximum flow may be reported in a footnote or in the REMARKS paragraph in the manuscript.

MAXIMUM PEAK STAGE.—The maximum instantaneous peak stage occurring for the water year or designated period. Occasionally the maximum stage for a year may occur at midnight at the beginning or end of the year, on a recession from or rise toward a higher peak in the adjoining year. In this case, the maximum peak stage is given in the table and the maximum stage may be reported in the REMARKS paragraph in the manuscript or in a footnote. If the dates of occurrence of the maximum peak stage and maximum peak flow are different, the REMARKS paragraph in the manuscript or a footnote may be used to provide further information.

INSTANTANEOUS LOW FLOW.—The minimum instantaneous discharge occurring for the water year or for the designated period.

ANNUAL RUNOFF.—Indicates the total quantity of water in runoff for a drainage area for the year. Data reports may use any of the following units of measurement in presenting annual runoff data:

Acre-foot (AC-FT) is the quantity of water required to cover 1 acre to a depth of 1 foot and is equivalent to 43,560 cubic feet or about 326,000 gallons or 1,233 cubic meters.

Cubic feet per square mile (CFSM) is the average number of cubic feet of water flowing per second from each square mile of area drained, assuming the runoff is distributed uniformly in time and area.

Inches (INCHES) indicate the depth to which the drainage area would be covered if all of the runoff for a given time period were uniformly distributed on it.

10 PERCENT EXCEEDS.—The discharge that has been exceeded 10 percent of the time for the designated period.

50 PERCENT EXCEEDS.—The discharge that has been exceeded 50 percent of the time for the designated period.

90 PERCENT EXCEEDS.—The discharge that has been exceeded 90 percent of the time for the designated period.

Data collected at partial-record stations follow the information for continuous-record sites. Data for partial-record discharge stations are presented in two tables. The first table lists annual maximum stage and discharge at crest-stage stations, and the second table lists discharge measurements at low-flow partial-record stations. The tables of partial-record stations are followed by a listing of discharge measurements made at sites other than continuous-record or partial-record stations. These measurements are often made in times of drought or flood to give better areal coverage to those events. Those measurements and others collected for a special reason are called measurements at miscellaneous sites.

## Identifying Estimated Daily Discharge

Estimated daily-discharge values published in the water-discharge tables of annual State data reports are identified. This identification is shown either by flagging individual daily values with the letter “e” and noting in a table footnote, “e—Estimated,” or by listing the dates of the estimated record in the REMARKS paragraph of the station description.

## Accuracy of Field Data and Computed Results

The accuracy of streamflow data depends primarily on (1) the stability of the stage-discharge relation or, if the control is unstable, the frequency of discharge measurements, and (2) the accuracy of observations of stage, measurements of discharge, and interpretations of records.

The degree of accuracy of the records is stated in the REMARKS in the station description. “Excellent” indicates that about 95 percent of the daily discharges are within 5 percent of the true value; “good” within 10 percent; and “fair,” within 15 percent. “Poor” indicates that daily discharges have less than “fair” accuracy. Different accuracies may be attributed to different parts of a given record.

Values of daily mean discharge in this report are shown to the nearest hundredth of a cubic foot per second for discharges of less than 1 ft<sup>3</sup>/s; to the nearest tenths between 1.0 and 10 ft<sup>3</sup>/s; to whole numbers between 10 and 1,000 ft<sup>3</sup>/s; and to three significant figures above 1,000 ft<sup>3</sup>/s. The number of significant figures used is based solely on the magnitude of the discharge value. The same rounding rules apply to discharge values listed for partial-record stations.

Discharge at many stations, as indicated by the monthly mean, may not reflect natural runoff due to the effects of diversion, consumption, regulation by storage, increase or decrease in evaporation due to artificial causes, or to other factors. For such stations, values of cubic feet per second per square mile and of runoff in inches are not published unless satisfactory adjustments can be made for diversions, for changes in contents of reservoirs, or for other changes incident to use and control. Evaporation from a reservoir is not included in the adjustments for changes in reservoir contents, unless it is so stated. Even at those stations where adjustments are made, large errors in computed runoff may occur if adjustments or losses are large in comparison with the observed discharge.

## Other Data Records Available

Information of a more detailed nature than that published for most of the stream-gaging stations such as discharge measurements, gage-height records, and rating tables is available from the USGS Water Science Center. Also, most stream-gaging station records are available in computer-usable form and many statistical analyses have been made.

Information on the availability of unpublished data or statistical analyses may be obtained from the USGS Water Science Center (see address that is shown on the back of the title page of this report).