

# U.S. Geological Survey Streamgaging

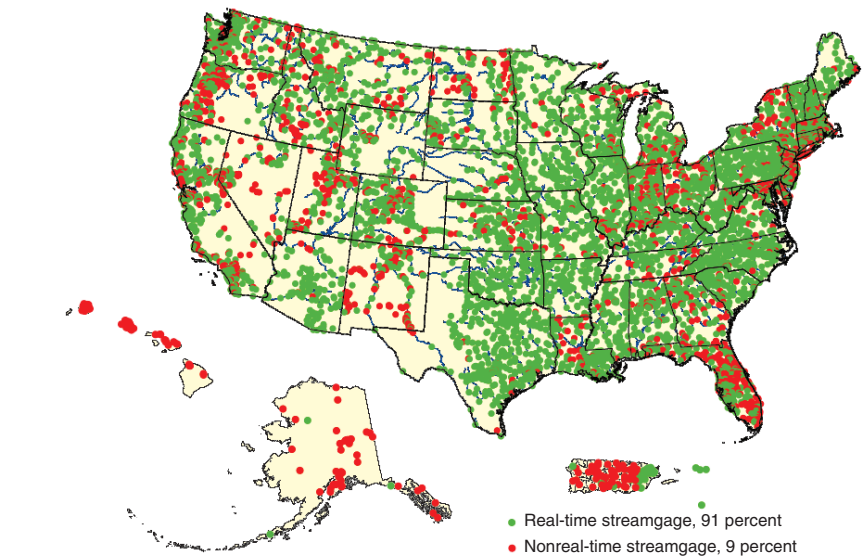
## ...from the National Streamflow Information Program

*This Fact Sheet is one in a series that highlights information or recent research findings from the USGS National Streamflow Information Program (NSIP). The investigations and scientific results reported in this series require a nationally consistent streamgaging network with stable long-term monitoring sites and a rigorous program of data, quality assurance, management, archiving, and synthesis. NSIP produces multipurpose, unbiased surface-water information that is readily accessible to all.*

### Introduction

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) started its first streamgauge in 1889 on the Rio Grande River in New Mexico to help determine if there was adequate water for irrigation purposes to encourage new development and western expansion. The USGS currently (2007) operates about 7,400 streamgages nationwide (fig. 1) as part of the National Streamflow Information Program (NSIP). These streamgages provide streamflow information for a wide variety of uses including flood prediction, water management and allocation, engineering design, research, operation of locks and dams, and recreational safety and enjoyment. These streamgages are operated by the USGS, in partnerships with more than 800 Federal, State, Tribal, and local cooperating agencies. In 2007, about 91 percent of these streamgages electronically record and transmit streamflow information to the World Wide Web in near real-time (<http://waterdata.usgs.gov/nwis>). Most of these streamgages transmit the information by satellite, although telephone and radio telemetry also are used in some streamgages.

The purpose of this report is to describe how the USGS obtains streamflow information. Streamgaging generally involves (1) obtaining a continuous record of stage—the height of the water surface at a location along a stream or river, (2) obtaining periodic measurements of discharge (the quantity of water passing a location along a stream), (3) defining the natural but often changing relation between the stage and discharge, and (4) using the stage-



**Figure 1.** Current (as of 2006) U.S. Geological Survey streamgaging network.

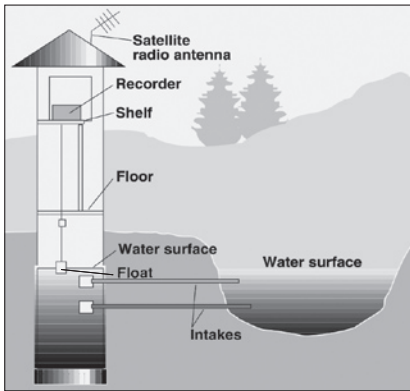
discharge relation developed in step 3 to convert the continuously measured stage into estimates of streamflow or discharge. Each of these four steps is explained in greater detail below.

### Measuring Stage

Most USGS streamgages measure stage and consist of a structure in which instruments used to measure, store, and transmit the stream-stage information are housed. Stage, sometimes called gage height, can be measured using a variety of methods. One common approach is with a stilling well in the river bank (see fig. 2) or attached to a bridge pier. Water from the river enters and leaves the stilling well through underwater pipes allowing the water surface in the

stilling well to be at the same elevation as the water surface in the river. The stage is then measured inside the stilling well using a float or a pressure, optic, or acoustic sensor. The measured stage value is stored in an electronic data recorder on a regular interval, usually every 15 minutes.

At some streamgage sites, a stilling well is not feasible or is not cost effective to install. As an alternative, stage can be determined by measuring the pressure required to maintain a small flow of gas through a tube and bubbled out at a fixed location under water in the stream. The measured pressure is directly related to the height of water over the tube outlet in the stream. As the depth of water above the tube outlet increases, more pressure is required to push the gas bubbles through the tube.



**Figure 2.** Diagram of a typical USGS streamgage with stilling well.

Streamgages operated by the USGS provide stage measurements that are accurate to the nearest 0.01 foot or 0.2 percent of stage, whichever is greater. Stage at a streamgage must be measured with respect to a constant reference elevation, known as a datum. Sometimes streamgage structures are damaged by floods or can settle over time. To maintain accuracy, and to ensure that stage is being measured above a constant reference elevation, the elevations of streamgage structures, and the associated stage measurement, are routinely surveyed relative to permanent elevation benchmarks near the streamgage.

Although stage is valuable information for some purposes, most users of streamgage data are interested in streamflow or discharge—the amount of water flowing in the stream or river, commonly expressed in cubic feet per second or gallons per day. However, it is not practical for a streamgage to continuously measure discharge. Fortunately, there is a strong relation between river stage and discharge and, as a result, a continuous record of river discharge can be determined from the continuous record of stage. Determining discharge from stage requires defining the stage-discharge relationship by measuring discharge at a wide range of river stages.

## The Discharge Measurement

Discharge is the volume of water moving down a stream or river per unit of time, commonly expressed in cubic feet per second or gallons per day. In general, river discharge is computed by multiplying the area of water in a channel

cross section by the average velocity of the water in that cross section:

$$\text{discharge} = \text{area} \times \text{velocity}.$$

The USGS uses numerous methods and types of equipment to measure velocity and cross-sectional area, including the following current meter and Acoustic Doppler Current Profiler.

## Current Meter

The most common method used by the USGS for measuring discharge is the mechanical current-meter method. In this method, the stream channel cross section is divided into numerous vertical subsections (see fig. 3). In each subsection, the area is obtained by measuring the width and depth of the subsection, and the water velocity is determined using a current meter (fig. 4). The discharge in each subsection is computed by multiplying the subsection area by the measured velocity. The total discharge is then computed by summing the discharge of each subsection.

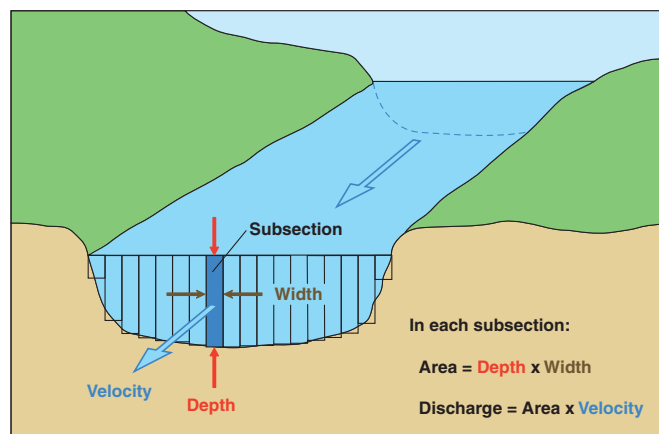
Numerous types of equipment and methods are used by USGS personnel to make current-meter measurements because of the wide range of stream conditions throughout the United States. Subsection width is generally measured using a cable, steel tape, or similar piece of equipment. Subsection depth is measured using a wading rod, if conditions permit, or by suspending a sounding weight from a calibrated cable

and reel system off a bridge, cableway, or boat or through a hole drilled in ice.

The velocity of the streamflow is measured using a current meter. The most common current meter used by the USGS is the Price AA current meter (fig. 4). The Price AA current meter has a wheel of six metal cups that revolve around a vertical axis. An electronic signal is transmitted by the meter on each revolution allowing the revolutions to be counted and timed. Because the rate at which the cups revolve is directly related to the velocity of the water, the timed revolutions are used to determine the water velocity. The Price AA meter is designed to be attached to a wading rod for measuring in shallow waters or to be mounted just above a weight suspended from a cable and reel system for measuring in fast or deep water. In shallow water, the Pygmy Price current meter can be used. It is a two-fifths scale version of the Price AA meter and is designed to be attached to a wading rod. A third mechanical current meter, also a variation of the Price AA current meter, is used for measuring water velocity beneath ice. Its dimensions allow it to fit easily through a small hole in the ice, and it has a polymer rotor wheel that hinders the adherence of ice and slush (see fig. 5).

## Acoustic Doppler Current Profiler

In recent years, advances in technology have allowed the USGS to make discharge measurements by use of



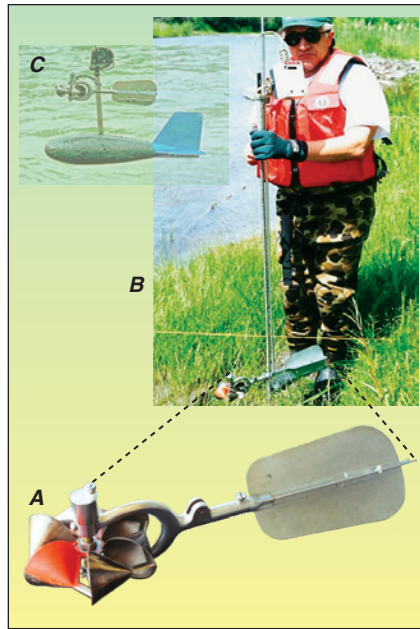
**Figure 3.** Current-meter discharge measurements are made by determining the discharge in each subsection of a channel cross section and summing the subsection discharges to obtain a total discharge.

an Acoustic Doppler Current Profiler (ADCP). An ADCP uses the principles of the Doppler Effect to measure the velocity of water. The Doppler Effect is the phenomenon we experience when passed by a car or train that is sounding its horn. As the car or train passes, the sound of the horn seems to drop in frequency.

The ADCP uses the Doppler Effect to determine water velocity by sending a sound pulse into the water and measuring the change in frequency of that sound pulse reflected back to the ADCP by sediment or other particulates being transported in the water. The change in frequency, or Doppler Shift, that is measured by the ADCP is translated into water velocity. The sound is transmitted into the water from a transducer to the bottom of the river (see fig. 6) and receives return signals throughout the entire depth. The ADCP also uses acoustics to measure water depth by measuring the travel time of a pulse of sound to reach the river bottom and back to the ADCP.

To make a discharge measurement, the ADCP is mounted onto a boat or into a small watercraft (see fig. 6) with its acoustic beams directed into the water from the water surface. The ADCP is then guided across the surface of the river to obtain measurements of velocity and depth across the channel. The river-bottom tracking capability of the ADCP acoustic beams or a Global Positioning System (GPS) is used to track the progress of the ADCP across the channel and provide channel-width measurements. Using the depth and width measurements for calculating the area and the velocity measurements, the discharge is computed by the ADCP using  $discharge = area \times velocity$ , similar to the conventional current-meter method. Acoustic velocity meters have also been developed for making wading measurements (see fig. 7).

The ADCP has proven to be beneficial to streamgaging in several ways. The use of ADCPs has reduced the time it takes to make a discharge measurement. The ADCP allows discharge measurements to be made in some flooding conditions that were not previously possible. Lastly, the ADCP provides a detailed profile



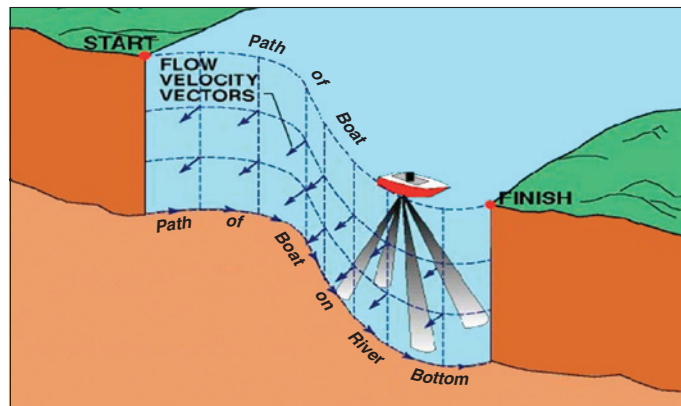
(Photograph courtesy of Michael Nolan, U.S. Geological Survey)

**Figure 4.** The current-meter method uses equipment such as (A) the Price AA current meter; (B) the Price AA current meter attached to a wading rod; and (C) the Price AA meter suspended above a heavy weight.



(Photograph courtesy of Michael Nolan, U.S. Geological Survey)

**Figure 5.** To measure velocity beneath ice, a mechanical current meter with a polymer rotor is attached to an ice rod and submerged through a hole drilled in the ice.



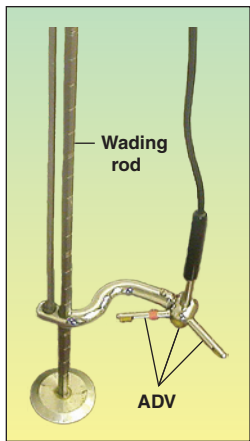
**Figure 6.** Acoustic Doppler Current Profiler (ADCP) mounted in a small watercraft, is used for measuring the discharge of a river. The ADCP acoustic beams are directed down into the water as it is guided across a river channel.

of water velocity and direction for the majority of a cross section instead of just at point locations with a mechanical current meter; this improves the discharge measurement accuracy.

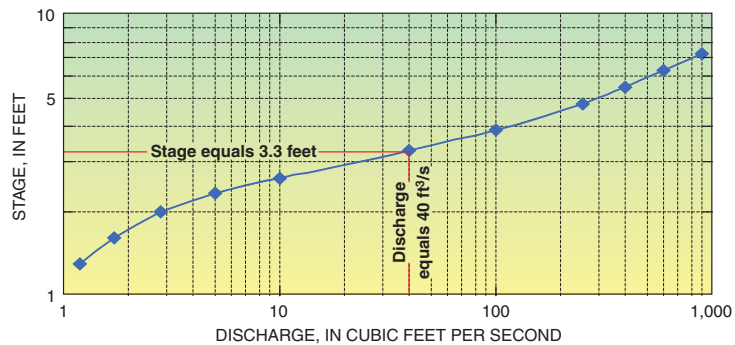
## The Stage-Discharge Relation

Streamgages continuously measure stage, as stated in the “Measuring Stage” section. This continuous record of stage is translated to river discharge by applying the stage-discharge relation (also called rating). Stage-discharge

relations are developed for streamgages by physically measuring the flow of the river with a mechanical current meter or ADCP at a wide range of stages; for each measurement of discharge there is a corresponding measurement of stage. The USGS makes discharge measurements at most streamgages every 6 to 8 weeks, ensuring that the range of stage and flows at the streamgage are measured regularly. Special effort is made to measure extremely high and low stages and flows because these measurements occur less frequently. An example of a stage-discharge relation



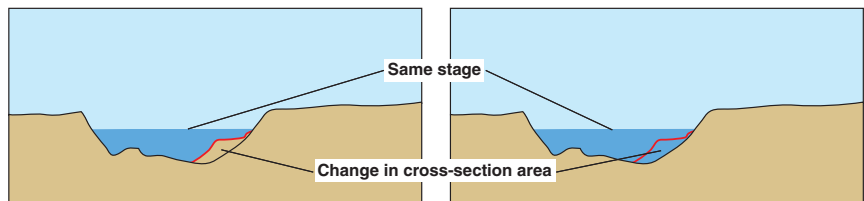
**Figure 7.** Acoustic Doppler Velocimeter (ADV) mounted on a wading rod.



**Figure 8.** Example of a typical stage-discharge relation; here, the discharge of the river is 40 cubic feet per second ( $\text{ft}^3/\text{s}$ ) when the stage is 3.30 feet (ft). The dots on the curve represent concurrent measurement of stage and discharge.

is shown in figure 8. The stage-discharge relation depends upon the shape, size, slope, and roughness of the channel at the streamgage and is different for every streamgage.

The development of an accurate stage-discharge relation requires numerous discharge measurements at all ranges of stage and streamflow. In addition, these relations must be continually checked against on-going discharge measurements because stream channels are constantly changing. Changes in stream channels are often caused by erosion or deposition of streambed materials, seasonal vegetation growth, debris, or ice. An example of how erosion in a stream channel increases a cross-sectional area for the water, allowing the river to have a greater discharge with no change in stage, is shown in figure 9. New discharge measurements plotted on an existing stage-discharge relation graph would show this, and the rating could be adjusted to allow the correct discharge to be estimated for the measured stage.



**Figure 9.** Erosion of part of a channel results in an increased cross-sectional area in the diagram on the right and the potential for conveying a larger quantity of water at the same stage.

the calculated discharge is accurate. In addition, the USGS has quality-control processes in place to ensure the streamflow information being reported across the country has comparable quality and is obtained and analyzed using consistent methods.

Most of the stage and streamflow information produced by the USGS is available in near real time through the National Water Information System (NWIS) World Wide Web site (<http://waterdata.usgs.gov/nwis>). In addition to real-time streamgage data, the NWIS Web site also provides access to daily discharges and annual maximum discharges for the period of record for all active and discontinued streamgages operated by the USGS.

The USGS has provided the Nation with consistent, reliable streamflow information for over 115 years. USGS streamflow information is critical for supporting water management, hazard management, environmental research, and infrastructure design. For more information on USGS streamgaging, go to the USGS Web site at <http://water.usgs.gov>. For additional information on the National Streamflow Information Program, go to <http://water.usgs.gov/nsip/>. For more information on surface-water activities, go to the USGS Office of Surface Water Web site at <http://water.usgs.gov/osw/>. To see current streamflow conditions nationwide or in your area, go to <http://water.usgs.gov/waterwatch>.

*By Scott A. Olson and J. Michael Norris*

## Converting Stage Information to Streamflow Information

Most USGS streamgages transmit stage data by satellite to USGS computers where the stage data are used to estimate streamflow using the developed stage-discharge relation (rating) (see fig. 8). The stage information is routinely reviewed and checked to ensure that

## Summary

Streamgaging involves obtaining a continuous record of stage, making periodic discharge measurements, establishing and maintaining a relation between the stage and discharge, and applying the stage-discharge relation to the stage record to obtain a continuous record of discharge.

For further information, please contact:  
 J. Michael Norris  
 National Streamflow Information Program  
 U.S. Geological Survey  
 361 Commerce Way  
 Pembroke, NH 03275  
 mnorris@usgs.gov