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# **Optimization Techniques for Hydrologic Engineering**

**April 1966**

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OPTIMIZATION TECHNIQUES FOR HYDROLOGIC ENGINEERING<sup>(1)</sup>

by

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INTRODUCTION

Because of the increasing complexity of water resource planning, design and operation studies, there is increasing need for a mathematical procedure that will select the optimum sizes and characteristics of components to produce a desired result. For example, there is need for a practical computational procedure to select the optimum sizes and combination of units and operation plans of a contemplated water resource system, so that some criterion such as benefit-cost ratio will be optimum. There are many other problems in hydrologic engineering where optimization procedures can be effectively applied, such as determination of storage and minimum pool requirements to provide specified services, determination of unit hydrograph coefficients, loss coefficients, routing coefficients, etc., that best explain observed phenomena. A variety of available optimization techniques is briefly discussed, and detailed description of a highly flexible and easily adaptable procedure is given herein.

- (1) For presentation at the 47th Annual Meeting of the American Geophysical Union, Washington, D.C., 22 April 1966.
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## APPLICABILITY OF OPTIMIZATION PROCEDURES

In water resources design problems, it has become increasingly important to examine a range of project sizes and combinations of projects and project components in order to select the "best" design for a river development. In considering a single reservoir for a single purpose, this can be done with relative ease. When more than one purpose is served, division of project capabilities among the services need be studied, as well as project size. If this is accompanied by seasonal variations in the division and by complex conditions such as might depend on runoff forecasts, then the problem rapidly surpasses present capability to determine a complete solution. The problem is usually resolved by stipulating fixed requirements for most services and allowing only one service requirement to vary. When, in addition to a multiplicity of purposes, there is also a multiplicity of projects (reservoirs, diversions, power plant, etc.) that combine to serve the same purposes, then the practical determination of a best plan of development is clearly beyond present technical capability.

Considerable effort has been devoted during recent years to adapting mathematical optimization procedures to the solution of these complex water resources design problems. (References 4, 5 and 7 illustrate some of this work.) This has resulted in some ingenious schemes for solving simplified versions of such problems and has pointed up the fact that tremendous amounts of computation are required, probably overtaxing the capabilities of modern

computers in the case of complex river development proposals. The net result is that mathematical optimization procedures promise to be highly useful in major water resources problems for the near future, but only in conjunction with the practical judgment of experienced planning engineers. Through several trials of system design, a few combinations can be selected that are considered most feasible, and the optimization procedures can be used for determination of the absolute optimum in each case. The difference in approximate solutions by judgment and accurate solutions by computer optimization may result in millions of dollars of benefit and is therefore quite significant.

In many other water resources problems, optimization procedures can provide rapid and inexpensive solutions to extremely complex problems. In all cases, work must be accomplished by electronic digital computer because of the amount of computation involved.

#### BASIC OPTIMIZATION APPROACHES

Although the writer knows of no case where an actual water resource system design has been based on mathematical optimization procedures, there is considerable development activity and some literature on basic optimization procedures and their potential application to water resources problems. These procedures fall into three basic groups: linear programming and some non-linear adaptations thereof, dynamic programming, and gradient methods of successive trial solutions. The first two groups provide direct solutions, but require great ingenuity for application to even moderately complex problems.

No applications of linear programming to water resources design appear in literature, and it is doubtful that the technique, by itself, will have practical application to water resource problems, because of their extreme complexity in relation to the simplicity of the linear programming model. For this reason, the procedure is not discussed further herein, but can be examined in reference 8 and other texts.

Several applications of dynamic programming to water resources problems do appear in literature, and these all concern simplified versions of comprehensive design problems. Since a direct solution is intuitively more desirable than a solution by approximation, this approach (described in references 1 and 2) has an advantage over the gradient method described in detail herein, even though experience to date indicates that water resources problems of any reasonable complexity are not solvable by this means alone. Furthermore, dynamic programming (multistage decision) concepts are naturally adaptable for use in combination with other optimization procedures. Indeed, they have been used by planners for years. A storage-cost curve of a reservoir site, for example, is a function which states that a decision involving cost can be made with no further reference to the many factors that were used to establish the various ranges of cost.

Excellent descriptions and illustrations of dynamic programming methods and application to water resources design problems are contained in references 4 and 5. A brief summary of the general concepts used is contained herein under "Multistage Decision Technique".



Methods of successive approximations are described in an excellent short exposition by Brooks in reference 3. The most common approach is the "Method of Steepest Ascent", and a similar approach, which treats one component at a time instead of all simultaneously, is the "Univariate Method". It is this last method that will be described in detail herein, because it is most easily adapted to the orthodox procedures used by engineers and can be used in conjunction with "engineering judgment". With minor changes, the description will apply to the Method of Steepest Ascent or the Method of Steepest Descent, the name depending on whether the objective function is to be maximized or minimized.

#### NATURE OF THE OBJECTIVE FUNCTION

In the application of any optimization procedure, it is necessary to delineate the exact basis on which the best solution is to be judged. This must be a single index which can be expressed as any function of the system components. This index is referred to variously as the "objective function", return function, value function, or criterion function. For example, it might be stated that the best system is the one which produces the greatest excess of power revenue over costs for varying storage capacity up to a specified maximum at a single reservoir, varying minimum power storage and varying power plant capacity up to a specified maximum, all operating between a full pool level on January 1, 1921 and minimum power pool level on December 31, 1940.

The example is complicated, since power revenue is a function of dependable plant capacity as well as total power generation, since power capacity and generation are complex functions of head and hydraulic losses as well as reservoir release, since evaporation losses vary with storage, season and other factors, and since the power demand pattern would vary from hour to hour, day to day and month to month throughout the year. On the other hand, the example is simplified, since it is assumed that recurrence of streamflows during a particular 20-year period is an adequate test, since no project functions other than power are considered, and since only an isolated project is studied.

In the selection of a project design, many intangible factors that cannot be readily expressed numerically as part of the objective function are often important. These are preferably to be given a numerical value, but might otherwise be given consideration in modifying the optimum system determined analytically.

#### THE UNIVARIATE METHOD

The "gradient" methods of successive approximation are most easily adaptable to water resources applications, because the basic hydrologic and economic analysis can be made in the traditional manner. These methods therefore require less ingenuity and less modification of engineering techniques and procedures than do other methods. Steps in the application of the Univariate Method of optimization are as follows:

1. Assign initial values to all variables in the system to be analyzed. These values should constitute a most reasonable first approximation to an optimum system.

2. Compute the objective function of the system for the initial values of variables assigned. This can be a complete basin routing (simulation) study and economic evaluation, for example.

3. Arrange the system variables in the order in which they should be changed to most rapidly approach optimum.

4. Taking each system variable (working variable) in turn, decrease its magnitude by 10 percent and by 20 percent, respectively, (or smaller proportional decrements) and compute the objective function for each change. This gives three separate system evaluations for equally spaced values of one system component with all other system components held constant.

5. Using the convergence procedure described in the following section, estimate the best value of the working variable.

6. Repeat steps 4 and 5 for all system variables. This will give a second approximation for all system components, but, since changes in one variable will affect relations of other variables to the objective function, this process must be repeated.

7. Steps 4 through 6 should be repeated at least once, and probably twice is sufficient for the first set of complete searches of all variables. As the last complete search is made, record the amount of improvement in the objective function caused by each variable change.

8. Repeat step 5 for the variable which improved the objective function most in its last change until no single change improves the objective function more than a specified percentage. This percentage would usually be about 10 percent divided by the number of system variables, but would depend on the nature and application of the objective function.

9. Make one more complete search (steps 4 through 6) of the system variables, because changes made in step 8 might provide an opportunity for improvement of variables that showed little earlier improvement. Again record the amount of improvement of each variable.

10. Repeat step 8 and declare optimization.

#### CONVERGENCE TECHNIQUE

Because of the large amount of computation ordinarily involved in computing the objective function for any set of values for all variables, it is important to reduce to a minimum the number of sets of values requiring computation. There appears to be little discussion in literature of this matter of convergence speed. Some suggestion is contained in reference 6, which suggests in relation to the Method of Steepest Ascent that a given "direction" of simultaneous change of all system components be pursued until an optimum for the direction is reached, rather than to re-evaluate the direction at each step. However, there appears to be no suggestion in literature relative to selecting the size of step, that is, the amount of change for each iteration. The following procedure has been found to be safe and generally rapidly converging.

For a continuous variable, the maximum of a function is located at a root of the first partial derivative of that function with respect to that variable. If methods of finite differences are used, as suggested above, the function can be evaluated in any manner, and the use of differential calculus is not required. By evaluating the objective function for three equally spaced values of a given variable, as specified in step 4 of the Univariate Method, the first and second partial derivatives of the objective function are approximated as follows:

$$y = f(x) \quad (1)$$

$$\frac{\Delta y}{\Delta x} = \frac{f(x_0 + \Delta x) - f(x_0)}{\Delta x} \quad (2)$$

$$\frac{\Delta^2 y}{(\Delta x)^2} = \frac{f(x_0 + 2\Delta x) - 2f(x_0 + \Delta x) + f(x_0)}{(\Delta x)^2} \quad (3)$$

With equations 2 and 3, it is possible to determine the direction in which the objective function is being improved and whether convergence is occurring. If equation 2 yields a positive value, for example, the variable  $x$  must be increased to increase the objective function and decreased to decrease the objective function. If equation 3 yields a positive value, for example, the function is convex downward, and convergence toward a minimum is indicated, but divergence away from a maximum is indicated.

By use of the Newton-Raphson method of successive approximations, equations 2 and 3 can be used to estimate the root of the first partial differential of the objective function, and hence the optimum value of the working variable if convergence is indicated. This is obtained as follows:

$$x_1 = x_0 - \frac{\Delta y / \Delta x}{\Delta^2 y / (\Delta x)^2} \quad (4)$$

If divergence is indicated, a relatively large step can be taken in the direction of improved objective function. A factor of 1.5 constitutes a reasonable large step in many applications and, because of the uncertainty of the nature of the objective function, a limit such as a factor of 1.5 should be set on all changes. Furthermore, there is no assurance that the function is regular enough to assure improvement of the objective function when the step is taken. Accordingly, the objective function must be tested after the step is taken and before it is retained.

If the objective function is not improved after a specific step (change in one variable), it is likely that the point of optimum has been passed by at least a factor of two. Accordingly, it is good practice to reduce the step by 70 percent and re-test. If there still is no improvement, another 70 percent reduction should be taken and another test made. If there remains no improvement, the working variable should be returned to its original value with the hope that it will produce an improvement after other variables in the system have been changed.

The convergence technique described herein is very helpful in the cases of "manageable" functions, that is, those that vary gradually and continuously. In water resources design and other hydrologic engineering problems, it is possible generally to define functions so that discontinuities do not exist and so that the functions concerned do not fluctuate too rapidly.

#### SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is entirely possible that a solution indicated to be optimum is simply a sub-optimum and that some other combination of variables will yield a higher optimum. It is also possible that two variables can be so interrelated that optimizing one destroys the effect of the other. These are the two conditions against which it is important to guard. The first of these possibilities can be avoided when it is possible to consider all important variables and all promising ranges of those variables. The second condition can be minimized if the effect of each variable is made as nearly independent as possible of the other variables. For example, instead of expressing individually the sizes of 2 reservoirs serving the same purpose, their total capacity and the proportion in either reservoir might be used.

It is also necessary to impose constraints on each variable, where appropriate. In addition to specifying maximum and minimum values of project components, one project function such as power generation or recreation should not be permitted to eliminate other needed functions, for example.

Such constraints on a variable can be expressed as functions of other variables, if necessary, or by attaching high "penalty" amounts to the objective function for unacceptable ranges of that variable.

In the univariate approach to optimization, the handling of constraints expressed as maximum and minimum allowable values of each component variable is relatively simple. It is necessary to assure first that the decrementing of each variable does not extend beyond the minimum allowable value. If it would, either smaller decrements or use of increments is necessary. Secondly, as soon as a step change is computed, the new value of the variable must be checked for constraints before the check is made on improvement in the objective function. If the allowable range of the working variable is exceeded, the working variable must be set at the nearest limit before proceeding further.

In the steepest ascent approach, the same type of check on constraints can be made, and each variable must be checked for allowable range and constrained accordingly before evaluating the new set of variables. Programming of this operation is much more complex than in the Univariate Method, but the end result is equivalent.

If initial values of any of the variables can be different from near-optimum by a factor of much more than 3 when using the convergence technique described above, it is possible that optimum will not be reached unless more numerous routine iterations of all variables are made. The number of routine



iterations to be specified is the exponent of 1.5 necessary to produce a factor as large as the largest anticipated ratio of optimum to initial values of any variable. Also, in order to minimize the number of routine iterations necessary, the suggested initial value of each variable should be the geometric mean of anticipated extreme values of optimum for that variable.

Handling of extremely complex problems using optimization techniques can easily result in computer programs that exceed largest available memory capacities or require prohibitive execution times. This can be minimized by dividing a problem into separable components wherever possible. For example, if one portion of a river basin can be analyzed independently of the remainder, it should be, even in some cases where minor sacrifice in accuracy results.

#### ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE

The Univariate Optimization Technique has been used in devising an automated unit-hydrograph and loss-rate analysis, which illustrates one of its many applications. In this case, the computer will solve for the best unit hydrograph and loss functions, given only observed rainfall and runoff quantities and the size of the drainage basin. The objective function to be minimized is the standard error of reconstituted streamflows. Variables used are described generally as follows:

1. Time of concentration for the unit hydrograph
2. Storage coefficient of the unit hydrograph
3. Shape index of the basin time-area curve
4. Ratio of surface imperviousness
5. Index of loss coefficient vs. accumulated loss
6. Index of loss coefficient recovery
7. Index relating loss to rain intensity
8. Index of average storm loss coefficient
9. Index of initial storm loss coefficient

The last 2 items differ for each storm. Consequently, the number of variables involved is 7 plus twice the number of storms for which reconstitutions at the location are desired.

Convergence during an early test of the program using 3 storms is illustrated in figure 1, which shows that near-optimum conditions were attained after only one complete search of all variables. In this case, two complete searches were followed by modification of most influential variable until all variables had improved the objective function less than 1 percent.

In this computer program developed in the Hydrologic Engineering Center of the Corps of Engineers, any of the above 9 variables can be fixed simply by entering a positive integer for its control index on a header card. The program is automated by suggesting reasonable values for all variables whose initial values are not entered on the appropriate input card. In this particular example, the reconstitutions that would require a few days of work by an experienced engineer are done in a minute or two in a high-speed computer.

## STEEPEST ASCENT TECHNIQUE

The steepest ascent technique of seeking a maximum is handled in the same way as in the univariate technique, except that a "best direction" is followed. This best direction is computed as the resultant of the partial derivatives of all system variables. Thus, each system variable is changed (in one simultaneous operation) in direct proportion to the rate at which its change improves the objective function when other variables are being held constant. Once the direction of the change vector is established, a small change in that direction is usually made, and the complete process repeated until optimum is reached.

As suggested by Kelley in his contribution to reference 6, the direction need not be re-evaluated at every step, but can be followed until an optimum value of the objective function in that direction is reached. At this point, the direction would be re-computed and the process repeated until optimum is reached. This would ordinarily save most of the computation work. A further saving can be effected in most cases by use of convergence techniques described above. However, it is likely that the objective function varies far more erratically in the direction of steepest ascent (or descent) than in a univariate direction, and the function can be expected to be far less manageable. It is partly for this reason that the univariate approach is emphasized herein.

## MULTISTAGE DECISION TECHNIQUE

One of the promising approaches to water resource design optimization is dynamic programming, which consists of a multistage decision process. The stages concerned can be time or space stages. As an example of time stages, the expected monetary value of water in a reservoir at the start of a specified time interval is a function of the value of the water released during the interval and the expected value of the remaining water at the end of that interval. The optimum release for the interval can be determined by calculating the sums of these two quantities for all feasible releases and selecting the release yielding a maximum total value. This assumes that a curve of expected values at the end of the interval is available. In order to start a computation of this type, therefore, a specified condition at the end of some (the last) interval is assumed. Usually this is minimum pool stage at the end of a drought period. The computation is then worked backwards with respect to time.

The first computation is direct, establishing an expected value for each reservoir storage level at the start of the last period as the value of the release during that period that would draw the reservoir to minimum pool. The second computation maximizes the total value of period release and remaining storage for each initial condition. This then determines the optimum release for any initial stage and the corresponding expected value of that initial storage. The process can be repeated indefinitely, establishing curves of optimum release versus stage for the start of each period.

When a condition is reached in this reverse chronological computation where a specific stage is required, such as full pool at the start of a drought, the complete sequence of period releases can be determined in a forward direction by selecting the optimum release each period and computing the resulting storage at the start of the next period.

The space-stage type of dynamic programming can also be used in planning water resource projects, as illustrated in reference 4.

With a great deal of ingenuity, one can design a multistage decision model that will provide a direct solution to simplified versions of complex water resource problems. It appears, however, that the complexity of water resource problems is growing faster than our ability to devise such models that would yield satisfactory solutions. Furthermore, a vast amount of computation is necessary since so much "space" must be searched in order to assure that the optimization function at each step will include the region through which the optimum path will later pass. For these reasons, the most promising approach to system optimization in water resources project design appears to be a rapidly converging gradient procedure based on successive approximations, using dynamic programming components to the extent that they will provide a "decoupling" of a major complex into separable units.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Optimization processes are necessary to a reasonable solution of the increasingly complex design and operation problems that occur in water resources engineering. They are of great value in the solution of lesser hydrologic engineering problems where direct solutions are infeasible.

Gradient methods of optimization should appeal to the engineer, because the methods can operate by use of traditional engineering analyses, such as multipurpose sequential routing or system simulation, changing the components of the system in successive trials so as to obtain the best combination most rapidly. They can most easily be adapted to practical complex problems, and appear to require minimum programming and computation time. Because of the large amount of computation involved, the procedures are almost exclusively adaptable to high-speed digital computers.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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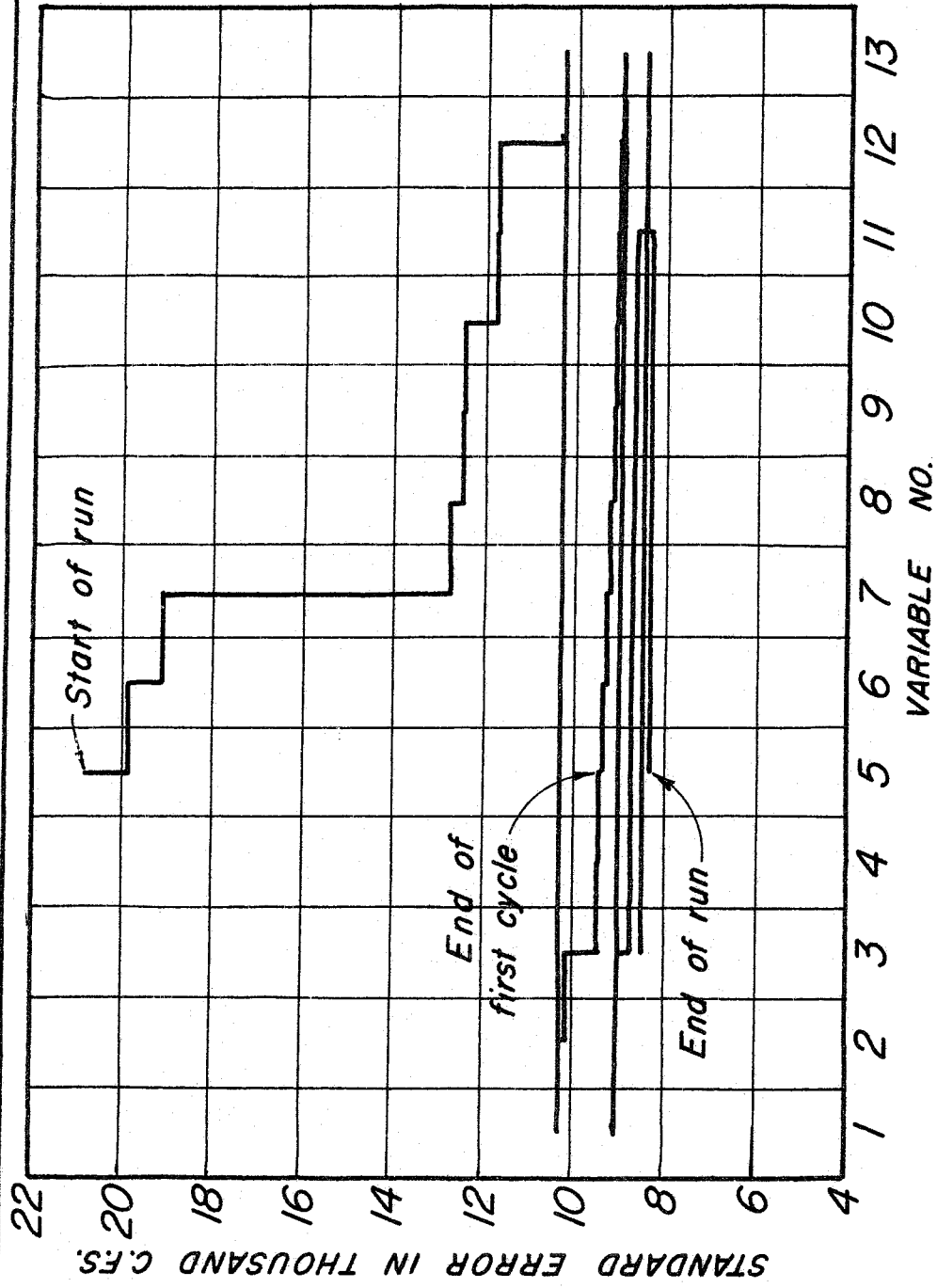


Figure 1

## EXAMPLE OF CONVERGENCE



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