

SURFACE-WATER RESOURCES OF THE COLUMBIA PLATEAU, WASHINGTON, OREGON, AND IDAHO

By Leonard M. Nelson

DISTRIBUTION OF PRECIPITATION

ABSTRACT

This report describes and documents surface-water resources for the Columbia Plateau, defined by the boundaries of the regional aquifer system. Annual precipitation ranges from less than 7 inches in the arid parts of the plateau to more than 100 inches in the bordering mountains. The mean annual precipitation distribution was redefined for this study area. Relations were established between mean annual precipitation and runoff, and were used in conjunction with the lines of equal precipitation to map the mean annual runoff distribution. The spatial distributions of precipitation and surface-water runoff on the plateau are presented on maps.

About 5 million acre-feet of surface water is used to irrigate about 1 million acres in Washington and 230,000 acres in Oregon. Because much of the annual surface-water runoff occurs from December through June, surface water is stored for use during the summer irrigation season. Streamflow can be estimated by using precipitation and is affected by storage in reservoirs and by diversions. In most streams, streamflow is insufficient to meet the demands of irrigation and established minimum flows.

PURPOSE OF REPORT

A study of the Columbia Plateau regional aquifer system began in October 1982 as one of a series of Regional Aquifer-System Analysis (RASA) studies by the U.S. Geological Survey. The Columbia Plateau aquifer system includes central and eastern Washington, north-central and eastern Oregon, and small parts of north-western Idaho. The purpose of the RASA program is to define and establish the geologic, hydrologic, and geochemical framework of regional ground-water systems. The objective of this report is to describe and document the availability of surface-water data and to describe the resources on the Columbia Plateau for use in an analysis of the water budget of the aquifer system.

The four sheets in this report describe and document the quantity and distribution of precipitation and runoff in the study area, and present descriptions of surface-water facts, statistics, and water use. The four maps are:

- Sheet 1. Distribution of precipitation on the Columbia Plateau.
Sheet 2. Distribution of runoff on the Columbia Plateau.
Sheet 3. Streamflow on the Columbia Plateau.
Sheet 4. Low flow and water use on the Columbia Plateau.

DESCRIPTION OF STUDY AREA

The Columbia Plateau aquifer system underlies about 51,000 square miles in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. The area is within the drainage of the Columbia River and its major tributaries, the Snake, Grande Ronde, Yakima, Walla Walla, Umatilla, John Day, Deschutes, and Klickitat Rivers. The study area is bounded on the west by the Cascade Range, on the south and southeast by the Blue Mountains, on the east by the Rocky Mountains, and on the north by the Okanogan Highlands.

In the bordering mountains, the predominant land cover is forest, and the annual precipitation ranges from 20 to more than 45 inches. Parts of some drainage basins for streams that originate in the Cascade Range receive more than 100 inches of precipitation a year. The central plateau is arid to semiarid and receives less than 15 inches of precipitation annually. Except for storm runoff, most of the rainfall in the arid and semiarid regions is absorbed by the soil; most of the absorbed rainfall is subsequently lost through transpiration by the plants or through evaporation. As described in "Comprehensive Framework Study of Water and Related Lands" (Pacific Northwest River Basins Commission, 1970), ranges, in inches, of various measures of evaporation and evapotranspiration in the study area are:

- 1. Annual class A pan evaporation; 30 to 40 in the mountains, 50 to 60 in the warmest parts.
2. Annual lake evaporation; 25 in the mountains, 40 in the central plateau.
3. Monthly pan evaporation in agricultural areas; 2 to 5 in the spring and fall, 7 to 12 in the summer.
4. Annual potential evapotranspiration; 25 to 30 in the mountains, 35 to 40 in the warmest parts.
5. Actual evapotranspiration; 7 to 10 in the central plateau, 12 to 16 in the mountains (assuming that soils have a water-storage capacity of 6 inches).

Generally, the potential evapotranspiration exceeds the actual by 15 to 20 inches.

In the study area, more than 5 million acre-feet of surface water is used annually, about 98 percent for irrigation and the remainder largely for municipal and industrial uses. Recreation, a nonconsumptive use, is the major use of surface water in the mountains. Because much of the annual surface-water runoff occurs from December through June, water is stored for use during the summer irrigation season. Most of the irrigation using diverted streamflow is in valleys along the lower reaches of the Yakima, Walla Walla, and Umatilla Rivers. In the central part of the plateau, there is no major tributary stream to supply water for irrigation. Here, much of the water used for irrigation is pumped from the Columbia and Snake Rivers. The Columbia River provides more than 2.2 million acre-feet to irrigate more than 500,000 acres in the Federal Columbia Basin Irrigation Project area.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

A number of previous studies by the U.S. Geological Survey have tabulated the surface-water resources for small areas of the plateau. These include studies by Kimmon and Sevea (1963), Nassar and Walters (1975), Mundorff, MacNish, and Cline (1972), U.S. Geological Survey (1975), Gregg and Laird (1975), Cline (1976), Molenaar (1977, 1982), and Brown (1979). Anderson and Bodhane (1956) reported on the 1956 flood on Esquatzel Coulee area, and Waananan and others (1971a,b) reported on the 1964-65 floods in the far western states. Laird and Walters (1967), Parker (1971), and Dion and Lum (1977) presented water-use information for Washington. Lines of mean annual runoff were presented for part of the study area by Bodhane and Thomas (1964) and Hulsing and Kallio (1964).

Other reports have contained statistical values for streamflow, including those by Cummins, Collings, and Nassar (1975), Haushild (1979), Moss and Haushild (1978), Friday and Miller (1984), and Williams and Pearson (1985). Reports for Oregon (Friday and Miller, 1984) and Washington (Williams and Pearson, 1985) present summaries of streamflow statistical values that include monthly and annual mean discharges, magnitude and probability of annual low flow, magnitude and probability of instantaneous peak flow, magnitude and probability of annual high flow, and duration tables of daily mean flows.

DISTRIBUTION OF PRECIPITATION

Mean annual distribution of precipitation was redefined for the study area because previously published maps for Oregon and Washington (U.S. Weather Bureau, 1964, 1965) did not adequately define the distribution in parts of the study area for the time period of interest. This map was reviewed by the National Weather Service.

Daily precipitation data for 103 stations covering 22 years of record (1956-1977) were obtained from the National Climatic Data Center (written communication, 1982). Missing data for a station were estimated by interpolating between the available data and the data at nearby stations. The mean annual precipitation values presented in table 1 include estimated values. The annual precipitation at four stations for the 22-year period (shown in figure 1) indicates large year-to-year variation and no apparent trend.

Lines of equal mean annual precipitation at each of 103 weather stations were plotted on a map on the basis of precipitation values for the 22-year period at the 103 stations, land-surface elevation, and the rate of changes in elevation or slope of the land surface. Smooth lines were drawn in areas of large changes in precipitation between stations and where data were lacking. In the high-precipitation areas, few data are available to define the position of the lines.

The distribution of precipitation within the year is similar throughout the study area. The mean monthly precipitation for the 103 weather stations (fig. 2) is highest in December or January and lowest in July. The percentage of annual precipitation falling monthly at each of the 103 weather stations is included in table 1, and shows the similarity in this distribution throughout the study area.

CONVERSION FACTORS AND VERTICAL DATUM

Table with 3 columns: Multiply, By, To obtain. Rows include inch to millimeter, foot to meter, acre to hectare, square mile to square kilometer, acre-foot to cubic meter, second to liter per second, and cubic foot to cubic meter.

Sea level: In this report "sea level" refers to the National Geodetic Vertical Datum of 1929 (NGVD of 1929) - a geodetic datum derived from a general adjustment of the first-order level nets of both the United States and Canada, formerly called Sea Level Datum of 1929.

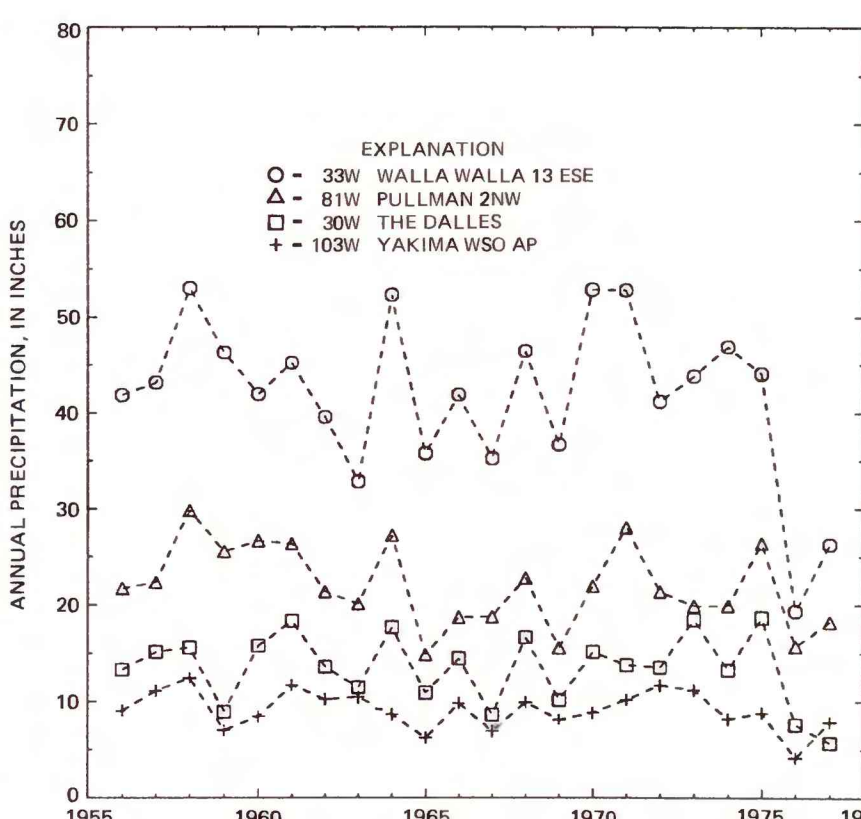
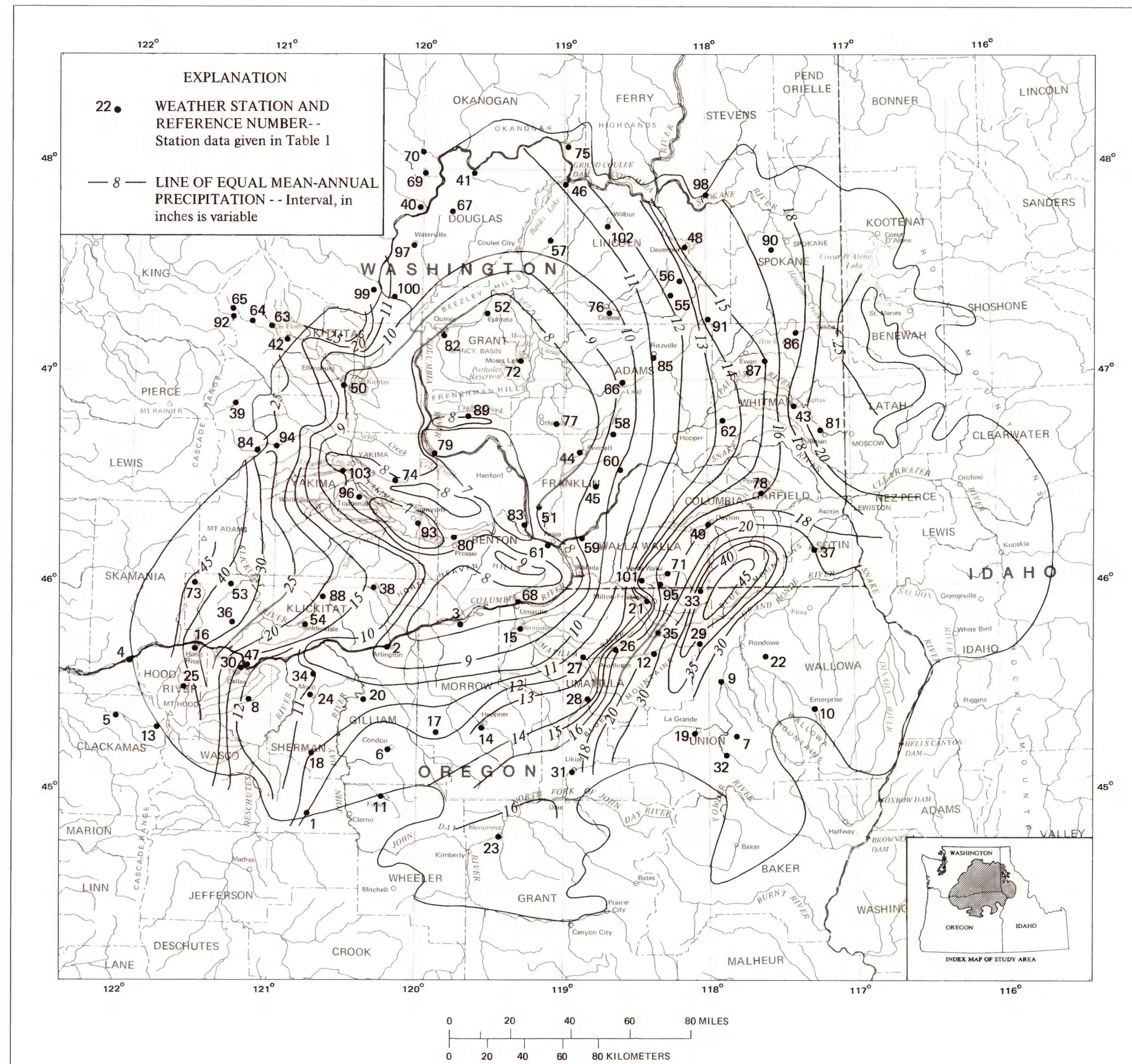


FIGURE 1.—Annual precipitation at four weather stations during a 22-year period (1956-77) showing a large year to year variability of precipitation.

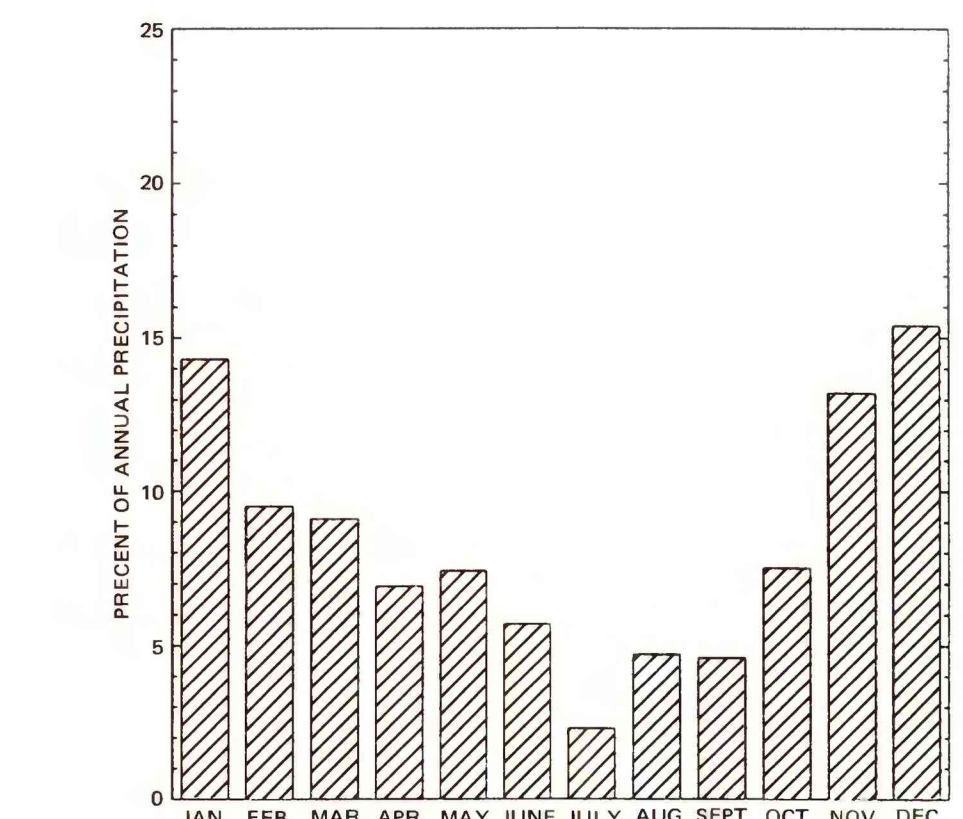


FIGURE 2.—Mean monthly distribution of precipitation for 103 weather stations during a 22-year period (1956-77).

Table 1.—Weather station on the Columbia Plateau.

Table with 13 columns: Reference Number, Index Number, Station, Elevation (feet), Longitude (degrees), Latitude (degrees), Mean Annual Precipitation (inches), and monthly precipitation (Jan-Dec) as a percentage of the mean annual.

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