

DISTRIBUTION OF RUNOFF

Surface-water-data collection sites on the Columbia Plateau are listed in table 2. Forty-two of these streamflow sites (shown on this sheet) were used to define a regional relation between precipitation and runoff. Analyses of relations which also accounted for such factors as average altitude of basin, average slope of streambed, snowfall amounts, and drainage area did not significantly improve the relation between precipitation and runoff.

The 42 sites were chosen on the basis of the period of record, the ability to define the precipitation within a basin, the spatial distribution of data, and the lack of effects from upstream water use; that is, length of record, lack of basin transfer of water, lack of diversion for irrigation, and lack of irrigation return flows were all considered in the selection of the 42 collection sites. In areas of low precipitation, all gaging stations including those with records as short as 6 years were used for the analyses due to the paucity of data. All precipitation records used in the analysis are for the period 1956-1977, whereas the period for streamflow records varies.

The mean annual precipitation for each of the 42 drainage areas above the gaging station was estimated from the precipitation map and U.S. Weather Bureau (1964, 1965) data. The stations then were divided into two groups according to the mean annual precipitation for the basin. Using estimated mean annual precipitation values and the mean annual runoff from the gaging-station record, a relation between precipitation and runoff was determined for each group. These relations, shown graphically in figure 3, are as follows:

Mean annual precipitation of less than or equal to 17.9 inches: RO = 0.107(P-6.03) SE = 0.25, R = 0.73
Mean annual precipitation of greater than 17.9 inches: RO = 1.01(P-16.64) SE = 1.59, R = 0.98

where RO = mean annual runoff, in inches per year; P = mean annual precipitation, in inches per year; SE = standard error, in inches per year; and R = correlation coefficient.

These relations intersect at P = 17.9 inches, and the first relation accounts for the fact that mean annual precipitation is greater than 6 inches per year throughout the study area. Eight isopleth values then were defined on the basis of the spatial distribution of precipitation and the standard error of the relation. These isopleth values were used in one of the above relations to define an isohyetal value to use as a guide for drawing the isopleths. The resulting runoff map represents the long-term runoff distribution in the study area; that is, the water flowing in the stream channels. The map is meant to show the generalized regional spatial distribution of mean annual runoff, and it should not be used to predict runoff for any ungaged basin. This is especially true in the drier central part of the plateau, where there may be no runoff for many years or none at all.

The time distribution of the runoff is significantly different from that of precipitation because of the storage of precipitation as snow over much of the study area. Most of the lowland runoff occurs from January through March (fig. 4) with the largest amounts produced from snowmelt with concurrent warm rains on frozen ground. In the mountainous areas with higher precipitation and generally colder air temperatures, the runoff is less affected by warm rains. In these areas with high elevations, most of the snowmelt is delayed due to the colder temperatures, and thus the largest runoff usually occurs from March through June (fig. 5).

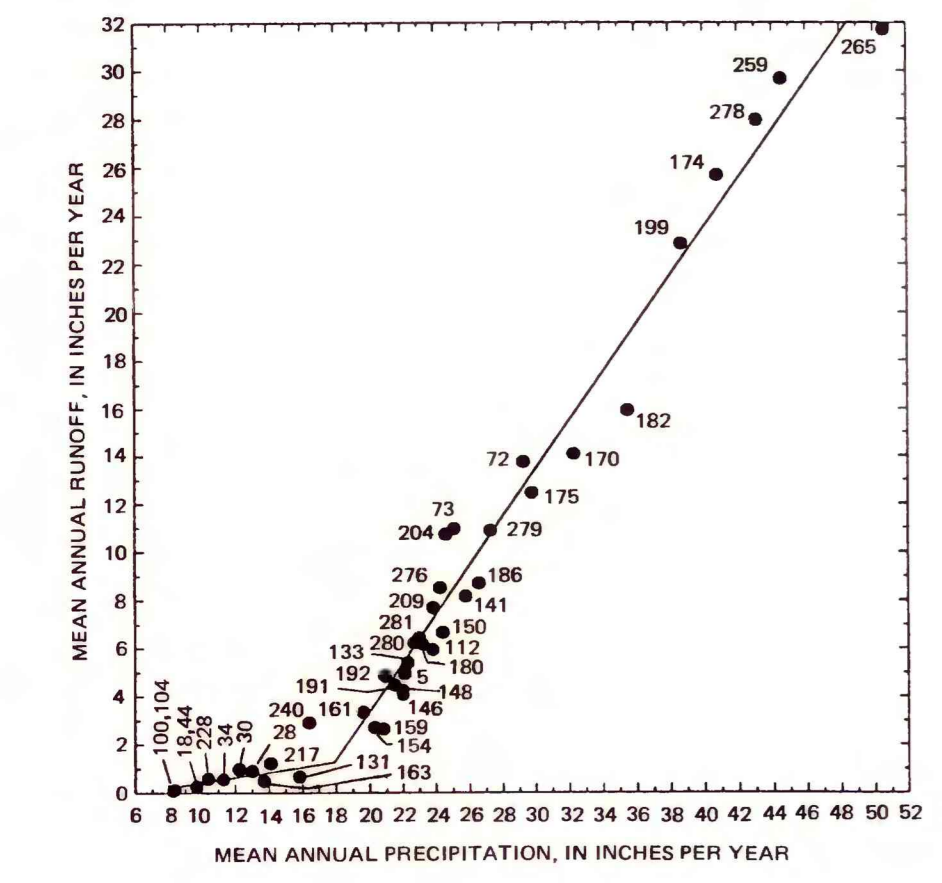


FIGURE 3.—Relation between annual precipitation and annual runoff.

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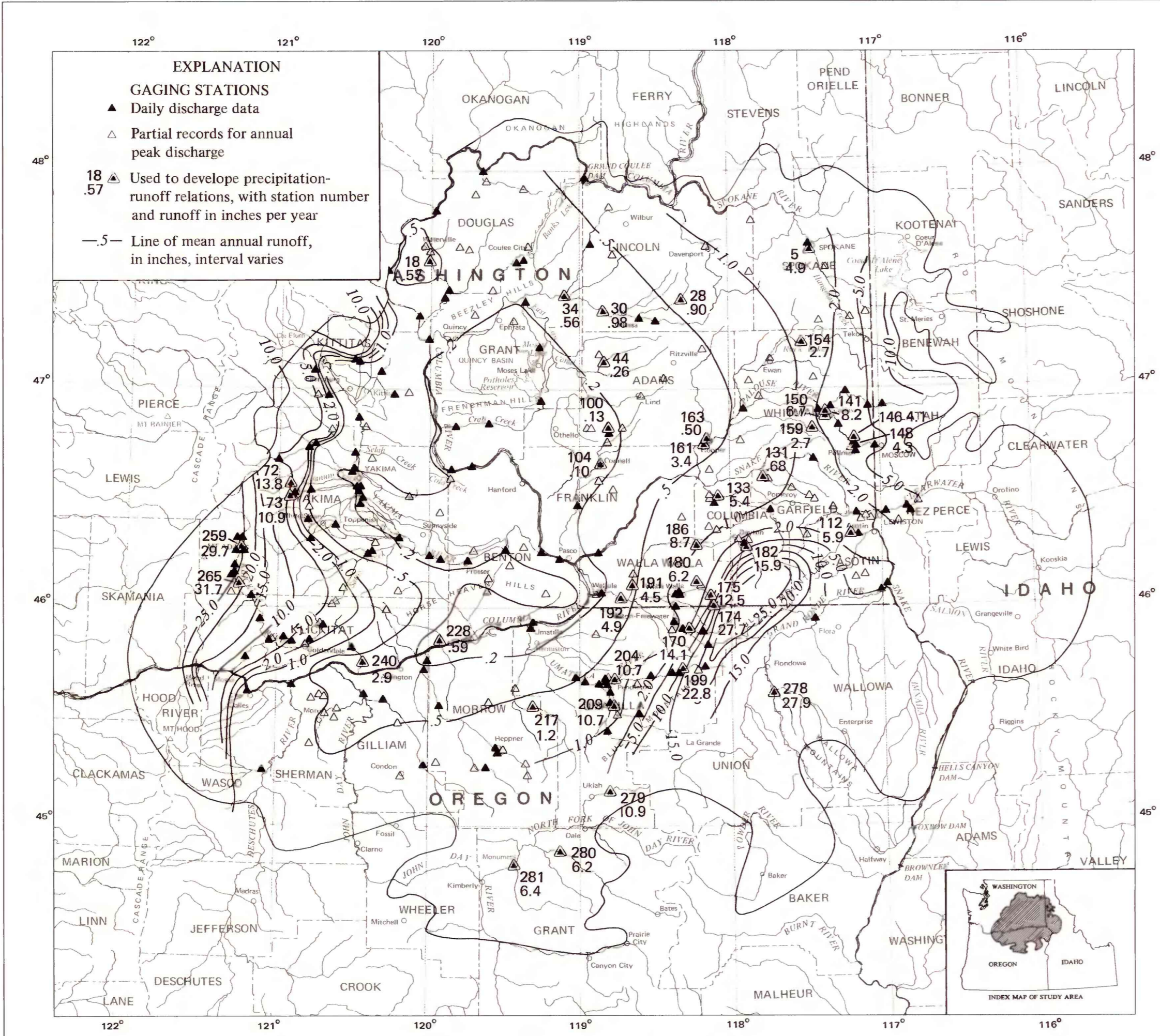


FIGURE 4.—Monthly runoff at four gaging stations during a 22-year period (1956-77) at four gaging stations showing the effect of basin altitude.

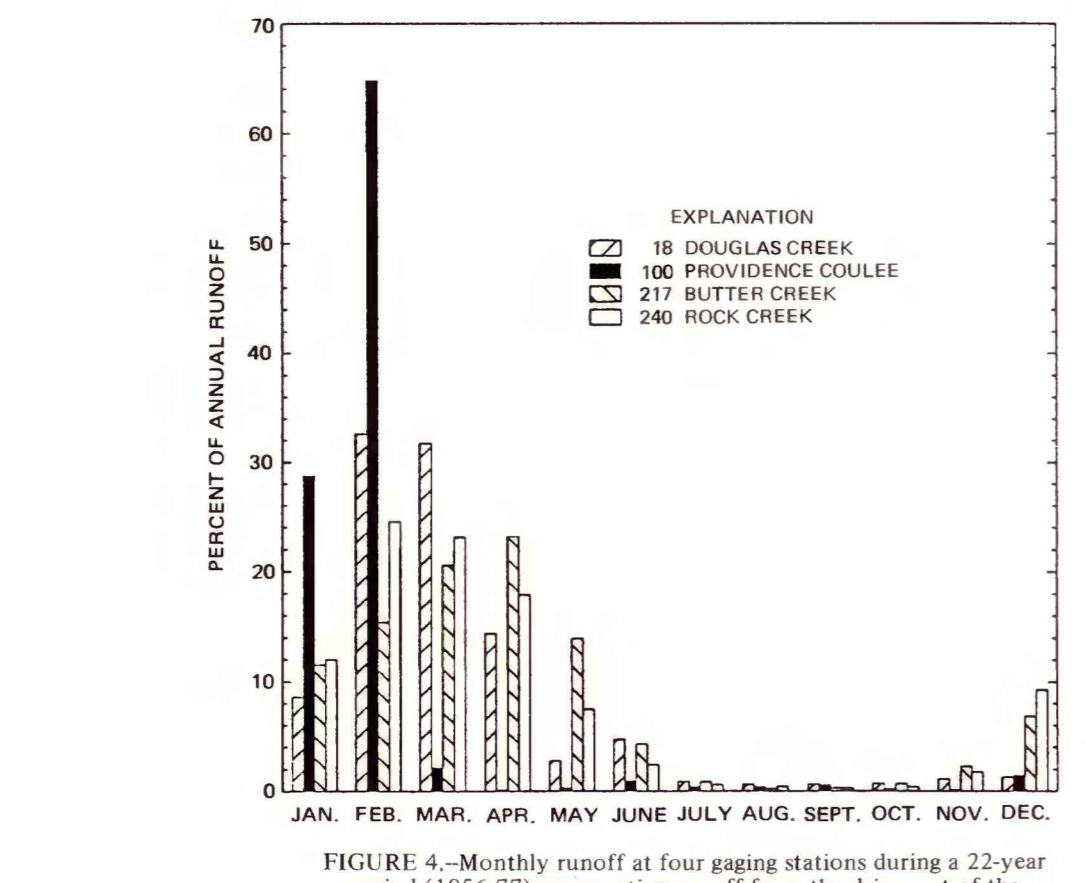


FIGURE 5.—Typical timing of the runoff during a 22-year period (1956-77) at four gaging stations showing the effect of basin altitude.

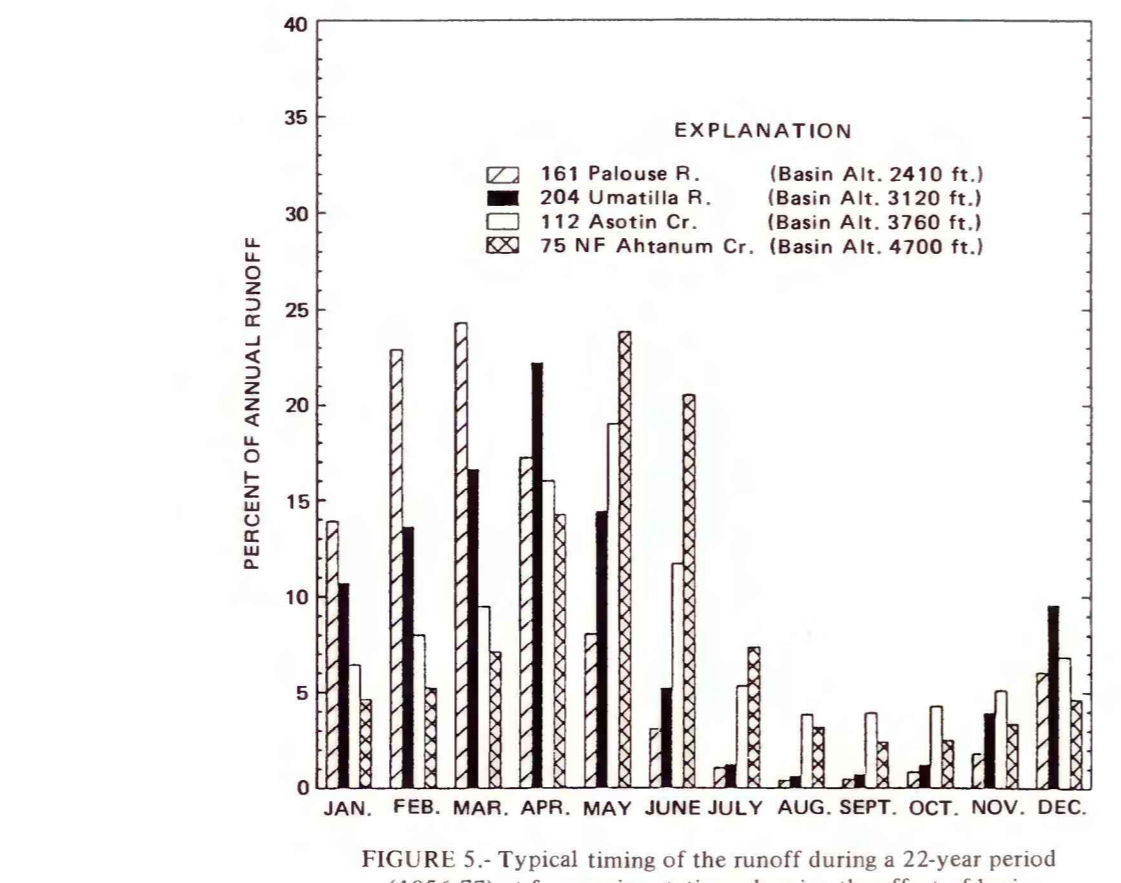


FIGURE 6.—Typical timing of the runoff during a 22-year period (1956-77) at four gaging stations showing the effect of basin altitude.

Table 2.—Surface-water data collection sites on the Columbia Plateau. Columns include: GAGING STATION REFERENCE NO., STATION NO., AND NAME; DRAINAGE AREA (SQUARE MILES); LONGITUDE LATITUDE (DEGREES); YEARS OF DISCHARGE RECORDS (DAILY VALUES ANNUAL PEAKS). The table lists 42 stations with their respective drainage areas and coordinates.

Table 3.—Gaging station reference no., station no., and name; drainage area (square miles); longitude latitude (degrees); years of discharge records (daily values annual peaks). This table provides detailed information for each of the 42 gaging stations, including their reference numbers and names.