

Appendix B

Synthetic Rainfall Distributions and Rainfall Data Sources

The highest peak discharges from small watersheds in the United States are usually caused by intense, brief rainfalls that may occur as distinct events or as part of a longer storm. These intense rainstorms do not usually extended over a large area and intensities vary greatly. One common practice in rainfall-runoff analysis is to develop a synthetic rainfall distribution to use in lieu of actual storm events. This distribution includes maximum rainfall intensities for the selected design frequency arranged in a sequence that is critical for producing peak runoff.

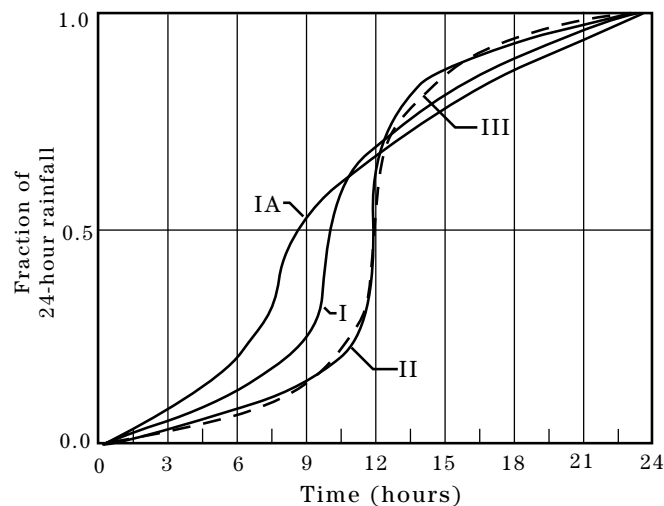
Synthetic rainfall distributions

The length of the most intense rainfall period contributing to the peak runoff rate is related to the time of concentration (T_c) for the watershed. In a hydrograph created with NRCS procedures, the duration of rainfall that directly contributes to the peak is about 170 percent of the T_c . For example, the most intense 8.5-minute rainfall period would contribute to the peak discharge for a watershed with a T_c of 5 minutes. The most intense 8.5-hour period would contribute to the peak for a watershed with a 5-hour T_c .

Different rainfall distributions can be developed for each of these watersheds to emphasize the critical rainfall duration for the peak discharges. However, to avoid the use of a different set of rainfall intensities for each drainage area size, a set of synthetic rainfall distributions having “nested” rainfall intensities was developed. The set “maximizes” the rainfall intensities by incorporating selected short duration intensities within those needed for longer durations at the same probability level.

For the size of the drainage areas for which NRCS usually provides assistance, a storm period of 24 hours was chosen the synthetic rainfall distributions. The 24-hour storm, while longer than that needed to determine peaks for these drainage areas, is appropriate for determining runoff volumes. Therefore, a single storm duration and associated synthetic rainfall distribution can be used to represent not only the peak discharges but also the runoff volumes for a range of drainage area sizes.

Figure B-1 SCS 24-hour rainfall distributions



The intensity of rainfall varies considerably during a storm as well as geographic regions. To represent various regions of the United States, NRCS developed four synthetic 24-hour rainfall distributions (I, IA, II, and III) from available National Weather Service (NWS) duration-frequency data (Hershfield 1961; Frederick et al., 1977) or local storm data. Type IA is the least intense and type II the most intense short duration rainfall. The four distributions are shown in figure B-1, and figure B-2 shows their approximate geographic boundaries.

Types I and IA represent the Pacific maritime climate with wet winters and dry summers. Type III represents Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic coastal areas where tropical storms bring large 24-hour rainfall amounts. Type II represents the rest of the country. For more precise distribution boundaries in a state having more than one type, contact the NRCS State Conservation Engineer.