



## Floods

# Glossary

**arroyo:** the dry bed of a stream or a gully in an arid country, usually rather narrow with steep banks. An arroyo is dry most of the time due to infrequent rainfall and the shallowness of the cut, which does not penetrate below the level of permanent groundwater. An arroyo is also known as a “wash” in the West and a “wadi” in the Near East.

**channels:** the beds of streams or rivers; the deepest part of a river or harbor, usually the middle, which is navigable by ships

**coastal flood:** the inundation of land areas along the coast caused by seawater that is above normal high tide

**condensation:** the process by which water vapor undergoes a change in state from a gas to a liquid. The physical process of condensation is the opposite of evaporation.

**crest:** the highest stage or level of a flood wave as it passes a point; the top of a dam, dike or spillway, to which water must rise before passing over the structure

**debris flow:** also called a mudslide, a type of flash flood in which the water contains an enormous amount of sediment, including mud, rocks, boulders, tree branches and other objects. Conditions for the generation of a debris flow include steep slopes, an abundant supply of loose material on the surface of the ground, sparse vegetation and a source of water, usually heavy rains.

**evaporation:** the process by which liquid water is converted into water vapor

**evapotranspiration:** a loss of water from the soil both by evaporation and by transpiration from plants

**flash flood:** a flood that follows within a few hours (usually less than six hours) of a heavy or excessive rainfall, the failure of a dam or levee or the sudden release of water impounded by an ice jam. Flash floods usually result from intense storms dropping large amounts of rain within a brief period. Flash floods occur with little or no warning and can reach full peak in only a few minutes.

**flash flood WARNING:** a statement by the National Weather Service issued to warn of a flash flood that is actually occurring or is imminent in the WARNING area. A WARNING can be issued as a result of torrential rains, a dam failure, the break-up of an ice jam or snow thaw.



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**flash flood WATCH:** a statement by the National Weather Service that alerts communities to the possibility of a flash flood in specified areas. A flash flood WATCH is issued to indicate that current conditions are favorable for a flash flood.

**flood:** an overflow of water into a normally dry area from an established watercourse—a river, stream, drainage ditch or pond. Floods develop more slowly than flash floods. Floods are the most common and widespread natural disaster, after fire. Most communities in the United States can experience some kind of flood after spring rains, heavy thunderstorms or winter snow thaws. Floodwater can rise slowly or rapidly, but floods generally develop over a period of days.

**flood stage:** the height at which a river, stream or other watercourse begins to overflow and cause damage

**floodplain:** a strip of relatively flat and normally dry land bordering a stream, river or lake that is covered by water during a flood and that has been inundated by the river during historic floods

**flood WARNING:** a statement by the National Weather Service that informs the public of a flood or imminent flood along larger streams in which there is a serious threat to life or property. A flood WARNING usually contains river-stage, or river-level, forecasts.

**flood WATCH:** a statement issued by the National Weather Service which informs the public that under current conditions a flood is possible

**groundwater:** the water within the earth that supplies wells and springs; the water in the zone of saturation where all openings in rocks and soil are filled, the upper surface of which forms the water table

**hydrologic cycle (water cycle):** the cycle of evaporation and condensation that controls the distribution of the earth's water as it evaporates from bodies of water, condenses, precipitates and returns to those bodies of water

**hydrosphere:** the watery layer of the earth's surface

**ice jam:** a stationary accumulation of ice that restricts or blocks the flow of a stream

**infiltration:** the movement of water through the soil surface into the soil

**mitigation:** the advocacy and accomplishment of measures that prevent the occurrence of a disaster or reduce the severity of its effects

**precipitation:** the liquid or solid water molecules that fall from the atmosphere and reach the ground in the form of rain, sleet, snow and hail

**river flood:** the rise of a river to an elevation such that the river overflows its natural banks, causing or threatening damage



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**slurry:** a watery mixture of insoluble matter

**speed of flow:** the rate at which water, particularly floodwater, moves; the speed of waterways

**storm drain:** a sewer that carries only surface runoff, street wash and snowmelt from the land. In a separate sewer system, storm sewers are completely independent of sanitary sewers, those that carry domestic and commercial wastewater.

**streambed:** the channel through which a natural stream of water runs

**surface runoff:** the water that travels overland to the stream channel. Rain that falls on the stream channel is often included in the measurements of surface runoff.

**transpiration:** the water discharged into the atmosphere from plant surfaces

**transport:** a movement from one place to another

**urban flood:** the flooding of streets, underpasses, low-lying areas or storm drains. This type of flooding is mainly an inconvenience and is generally not life-threatening.

**watershed:** the land area from which water drains toward a common watercourse in a natural basin

**water table:** the level below the earth's surface at which the ground becomes saturated with water. The water table is set where hydrostatic pressure equals atmospheric pressure.

**zone of aeration:** the layer just above the water table where the spaces between soil particles, or soil pores, may either contain air or water

**zone of saturation:** the layer of the earth's surface below the water table where the spaces between soil particles, or soil pores, are filled with water



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