The Challenge

All dams have spillways to safely route flows from extreme runoff events around them and prevent overtopping. In the last 100 years, overtopping due to inadequate or improperly designed spillways is the leading cause of dam failure and resulting loss of life. In Colorado and New Mexico, some spillways at existing high and significant hazard dams (those most likely to result in loss of life if a failure occurs) have deficiencies.

Estimating extreme rainfall amounts is a critical component of building safe dams. However, the data and methods currently used to calculate these quantities are dated and studies have shown current methods can both overpredict and underpredict rainfall, depending on location. A tenuous balance exists between the safety provided by conservatively designed spillways to protect dams against extreme events and the cost of that construction.

The Need

Modern meteorological methods to estimate probable maximum precipitation can reduce the likelihood of over- or under-estimating rainfall. New approaches aim to produce more realistic estimates of maximum precipitation to strike an appropriate balance between the protection of public health and safety and the required level of construction infrastructure.

The Colorado Division of Water Resources and the New Mexico Office of the State Engineer have identified and set as a priority the need to update their extreme precipitation estimates for use in the evaluation of spillway adequacy for dams in these states, based on the most modern methods and scientific understanding available.

Innovation

Due to similarities in geography and meteorology between Colorado and New Mexico, a cooperative, regional study has been undertaken, the first instance of states combining resources and working collaboratively toward a solution to the problem. The project began in June 2016 and is scheduled to be complete in June 2018. Of particular concern in both states are questions about the physical limits on high elevation rainfall amounts and the annual exceedance probability (AEP) of the extreme rainfall amounts used for spillway design. This reality has lead to using an innovative ensemble approach and methods to update extreme precipitation estimates.
This study includes three technical tasks, which are conducted concurrently and in collaboration with each other. Task 1 consultants (Applied Weather Associates) are updating the conventional deterministic “storm-based” methods. Task 2 consultants (Extreme Precipitation Group - EPG - MetStat and other partners) are developing a risk-based regional precipitation frequency estimation tool to enable AEP estimates of the Task 1 results. Task 3 (NOAA Earth System Research Laboratory) includes a proof-of-concept scope utilizing NOAA's state-of-the-art High Resolution Rapid Refresh (HRRR) physically-based dynamical weather prediction model. A dedicated project manager (Acclivity Associates) has been hired to coordinate project activities.

NOAA Contributions

NOAA is working with REPS partners to provide innovative solutions to meet this project’s unique challenges drawing on NOAA expertise in modeling and understanding of the physical processes that affect extreme precipitation. Experience from related stakeholder-driven research also allows NOAA scientists to critically consider limitations of past methods to estimate extreme precipitation and design updated alternative options. Research scientists in the Earth System Research Laboratory (ESRL) are leading this effort, with critical input from members of the Project Review Board, which includes NOAA representation from the National Weather Service, the Office of Water Prediction/National Water Center, and the ESRL Physical Sciences Division.

Potentially actionable science being developed by NOAA includes:

- Novel high-resolution datasets and post-processing techniques using a super-ensemble of hourly forecasts from the HRRR model.
- Improved understanding of the limitations of older estimation methods and assumptions.
- Actionable recommendations based on improved physical process understanding, such as the relationship between elevation and heavy rainfall.
- Assessment of climate change implications for future estimation studies.

Outcomes

The regional collaborative effort of the two states, combined with an ensemble scope of work and Project Review Board project oversight will ensure the development of scientifically robust processes and procedures for the prediction of extreme rainfall and the design of effective dam spillways. The project sponsors will be able to develop policies and rules that minimize the risk of dam failures by overtopping and ensure public safety, while at the same time allow for the most efficient use of existing and new facilities to maximize water storage potential in their states. If all project goals are fulfilled then similar benefits can be achievable by other states and/or regions across the nation.

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