

THE HYDROLOGY OF A SLOPING FRAGIAQUALF

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ABSTRACT

A field experiment was conducted on a sloping Tokomaru silt loam (Typic Fragiaqualf). This soil has a permeable topsoil, but is underlain with an impermeable fragipan at 500 - 700 mm. Paired runoff plots (100 m² in area) were constructed, and over a four-year period, rainfall, water table levels and runoff were monitored. Infiltration and saturated hydraulic conductivity were also measured. During the study period, forty surface runoff events occurred with most of these being relatively minor events where less than 1 mm of runoff was generated. Subsurface flow rather than overland flow removed most of the excess rain over winter and early spring.

The dominant surface-runoff-generating process was found to be saturation overland flow. Hortonian runoff only occurred when the infiltration capacity was reduced by pugging of the soil surface. When such a treatment was applied to one of the plots, the saturated hydraulic conductivity of the topsoil was reduced from 500 - 1200 mm/day to only 0.8 mm/day. For the damaged plot, 25% (1.8 mm) of the 7.2 mm of rain which fell over a seven hour period became overland flow. This compared to 18% (1.3 mm) of the rain becoming surface runoff on the undamaged plot.

Aspects of modelling and simulation are discussed and several rainfall-runoff models are reviewed. A simple, physically-based, finite-difference model for predicting water table behaviour and runoff generation is described. The model uses the Dupuit-Forchheimer assumptions for flow below the water table, and it assumes a constant hydraulic potential between the water table and the surface.

Water table behaviour during and following a rainstorm was predicted reasonably accurately. Using hourly rainfall data, the occurrence and magnitude of runoff surface events over a winter/spring period were simulated. The model was also used to illustrate the importance of slope angle in subsurface flow and runoff generation. Over a winter/spring period, a 100 m² plot with a 10% slope was predicted to have nine days on which overland flow occurred, and subsurface flow rates which sometimes exceeded 30 mm/day. For the same period, a plot with a 2% slope was shown to have much less subsurface flow (with rates not exceeding 10 mm/day), and nineteen days of surface runoff.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF FIGURES.....	viii
LIST OF PLATES.....	xi
LIST OF TABLES.....	xii
CHAPTER 1	
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2	
HILLSLOPE HYDROLOGICAL PROCESSES	
Introduction.....	3
Overland flow.....	3
Saturated subsurface flow.....	7
Conclusion.....	9
CHAPTER 3	
MONITORING STORM EVENTS ON A SLOPING TOKOMARU	
SILT LOAM	
Introduction.....	11
The experimental site.....	11
Instrumentation.....	18
Surface runoff events during 1983.....	19
Measuring saturated hydraulic conductivity....	22
The effect of pugging on infiltration	
and runoff.....	26
Recovery after pugging.....	29
Water table decline.....	31
Conclusion.....	33

CHAPTER 4

THE PHILOSOPHY OF MODELLING AND SIMULATION

Introduction.....	34
Definitions.....	34
Mathematical models.....	37
Communication.....	39

Rainfall-Runoff Models

Introduction.....	39
Infiltration and the hydrological cycle.....	40
Conclusion.....	49

CHAPTER 5

A MODEL TO PREDICT SURFACE RUNOFF AND WATER TABLE
LEVELS IN A SLOPING TOKOMARU SILT LOAM

Introduction.....	51
Physical concepts.....	51
Evaluating the water content of the soil from weather data.....	58
Rainfall and evapotranspiration.....	58
Deep drainage.....	58
Surface runoff.....	59
Lateral subsurface flow.....	59
Effect of lateral subsurface flow on water table level.....	60

CHAPTER 6

SIMULATION OF RUNOFF EVENTS AND WATER TABLE DECLINE
FOR A SLOPING TOKOMARU SILT LOAM

Parameterisation of the model.....	63
Predicting runoff events.....	64
Simulation of individual runoff events.....	69
The effect of pugging on infiltration and runoff.....	73
Simulation of water table behaviour.....	74
The model as an aid to understanding processes.....	77

CHAPTER 7	
	CONCLUSION.....81
APPENDIX A	
	LIST OF SYMBOLS.....83
APPENDIX B	
	PROGRAM LISTING AND SAMPLE OUTPUT.....85
REFERENCES.....	94

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 2.1 The principal components of the hydrological cycle.....	4
Figure 2.2 Schematic illustration of the occurrence of various runoff processes in relation to their major controls.....	10
Figure 3.1 Average monthly rainfall and regional evaporation for Palmerston North.....	12
Figure 3.2 Contour plot of the research area showing the locations of the runoff plots and the twelve water table observation wells.....	14
Figure 3.3 Detail of PVC guttering used to collect runoff at the bottom edge of each plot.....	15
Figure 3.4 Rainfall histogram and runoff hydrograph for the storm event of August 23, 1983. Percentages of rainfall becoming surface runoff are shown in parentheses.....	20
Figure 3.5 Block diagram showing surface characteristics of the research area.....	21
Figure 3.6 Rainfall histogram and runoff hydrograph for the storm event of September 9, 1983. Percentages of rainfall becoming surface runoff are shown in parentheses.....	23

- Figure 3.7 Rainfall histogram and runoff hydrograph for the storm event of September 14, 1983. Percentages of rainfall becoming surface runoff are shown in parentheses.....28
- Figure 3.8 Water table decline, measured along three transects adjacent to the runoff plots, following the storm events of July 12-16, 1984.....32
- Figure 4.1 Diagram showing how the variable source area model operates under storm rainfall. As surface elements become fully saturated, storages are carried forward and the slope remaining within the zone of infiltration is redissected into 10 elements. When a surface element drains below saturation, the zone of infiltration is redissected accordingly (from Hewlett and Troendle, 1975).....48
- Figure 5.1 Equivalent depth of water (W) in the top 450 mm of the soil profile as a function of water table depth (T).....57
- Figure 5.2 Model representation of a runoff plot. The soil was sectioned into a number of segments including $j-1$, j and $j+1$. Q_j is the rate at which water flows out of segment j , and Q_{j-1} is the rate at which water flows into segment j . R_{j-1} is the rate of surface runoff onto segment j , and R_j is the rate of surface runoff off segment j61
- Figure 6.1 Rainfall and runoff events for Plot 1, real and simulated, during the winter/spring period of 1983.....65
- Figure 6.2 Rainfall and runoff events for Plot 1, real and simulated, during the winter/spring period of 1984.....66

- Figure 6.3 Rainfall and runoff events for Plot 1, real and simulated, during the winter/spring period of 1986.....67
- Figure 6.4 Rainfall histogram, real and simulated runoff hydrographs from Plots 1 and 2, for storm of August 23, 1983.....70
- Figure 6.5 Rainfall histogram, real and simulated runoff hydrographs from Plots 1 and 2, for storm of September 9, 1983.....71
- Figure 6.6 Rainfall histogram, real and simulated runoff hydrographs from Plots 1 and 2, for storm of September 14, 1983.....72
- Figure 6.7 Water table decline as measured and simulated for Transect A-B, along the "uphill" side of Plot 2, following the storm events of July 12-16, 1984.....75
- Figure 6.8 Water table decline as measured and simulated for Transect C-D, running down between Plots 1 and 2, following the storm events of July 12-16, 1984.....76
- Figure 6.9 Rainfall data and simulated runoff, subsurface flow and depth to the water table (10 m downhill from the top edge of the plot) for Plot 1 over the winter/spring period of 1983.....79
- Figure 6.10 Rainfall data and simulated runoff, subsurface flow and depth to the water table (10 m downhill from the top edge of the plot) for a hypothetical plot with a 2% slope over the winter/spring period of 1983.....80

LIST OF PLATES

	Page
Plate 3.1	Typical soil profile of a Tokomaru silt loam, showing the fragipan at approximately 700 mm and the pseudogley horizon immediately above.....13
Plate 3.2	Hut containing runoff monitoring equipment and cream vats used to collect excess runoff during large storms. The collecting trough at the bottom of Plot 2 is visible at right centre..... 16
Plate 3.3	Stephens Type F water level recorder (right) and the variable potentiometer system (left) used to measure the rate at which runoff filled the 200 l drum..... 17
Plate 3.4	Campbell CR21 micrologger used to record automatically rainfall, runoff and water table depths..... 17
Plate 3.5	The runoff plots on September 13, 1983. Plot 1 (left) shows severe pugging damage..... 27
Plate 3.6	The runoff plots on October 15, 1983. Plot 1 has now recovered from the pugging damage inflicted one month before. Both plots have a healthy pasture sward..... 30

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 3.1 Infiltration data for runoff plots.....	24
Table 3.2 Saturated hydraulic conductivity data for runoff plots prior to grazing.....	25
Table 3.3 Infiltration and saturated hydraulic conductivity data for runoff plots following pugging.....	26
Table 5.1 Soil water data for the four layers of Tokomaru silt loam under consideration, along with the value of the coefficient a_1 defined by equation [14] for each layer. (After Horne, 1984).....	55
Table 5.2 Coefficients for use in equation [21] along with range of W for which they apply. (After Horne, 1985).....	56

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A great deal of New Zealand's hill country consists of shallow, permeable topsoils overlying less permeable subsoils, which in turn are underlain by almost impermeable layers. The ultimate barriers to water percolation in the soil are most commonly the parent rocks from which the soils are derived. These are mainly mudstones and siltstones, but they can also be compacted gravels or conglomerates, and in soils derived from loess, a densely compacted fragipan.

The hydrological processes occurring on such hillsides are the subject of this study. During dry periods the hill-soils hold very little water and the perennial streams are barely flowing. In summer therefore, pasture growth is often restricted by a lack of water.

The autumn and early winter rains are mostly soaked up by the soil and, in general, have little immediate effect on streamflow. Once the soil wets up again, usually by mid-winter, the mechanism whereby the soil is able to regulate the amount of water entering the watercourses becomes less effective. The reservoir becomes replete, and further rain proceeds directly to the streams causing possible flooding and erosion during large storms.

In many hill country areas it has been observed that surface runoff occurs only during the most intense rainstorms. This suggests that the dominant hydrological process for water movement downslope is that of subsurface flow. The objectives of this study were to determine the principal hydrological processes occurring on a hillside, and to develop a simple model to simulate these processes.

Firstly the principles underlying our present understanding of hillslope hydrology need to be outlined. Chapter 2 is devoted to doing this. Chapter 3 describes measurements of the water table behaviour and runoff processes found in a humid climate, on a pasture-covered slope with a permeable soil underlain by an impermeable layer at 500 - 700 mm depth. Measurement of soil hydraulic properties is also detailed. Chapter 4 reviews the simulation of hillslope hydrology. Chapter 5 describes a particular model developed to simulate the hillslope hydrological data presented in Chapter 3. Chapter 6 presents and discusses the results obtained using this model. Chapter 7 summarizes the conclusions reached.