

## NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND COASTAL FLOODING

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### ABSTRACT

As ocean levels rise and population increases near the shoreline, coastal flooding continues to become an increasingly important issue. Storm surge and splash-over play a vital role leading to damage along the Maine and New Hampshire coastline. Coastal flood prediction is challenging as complex bathymetry and an irregular coastal configuration dominates this region. To improve this prediction and better conceptualize this phenomenon for meteorologists and emergency managers, a coastal flood climatology was created for northern New England. Discussion of wind and wave dynamics, the Ekman Spiral and the role of atmospheric pressure also served to provide an educational background. The lengthy Portland Harbor Tide gage record allowed for a comprehensive comparison with historical floods found in Storm Data Publication. Meteorological data was combined with oceanographic observations to correlate multi-scale environmental conditions which induce flooding. Predicted versus observed tidal conditions were compared and model guidance was examined for modern day cases. The results indicated coastal flood damage was primarily observed during periods of significant storm surge coinciding with large ocean waves, strong northeast winds, or in rare cases extreme rainfall. Coastal inundation primarily occurred during the cold season with tides recorded above and below the 12 foot (3.7 m) benchmark in Portland Harbor. In a limited dataset, statistically and dynamically driven storm surge guidance showed equal and opposite biases of storm surge prediction.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Coastal Flood Forecasting Challenges

Storm surge and coastal flood prediction raise challenging issues along the Maine and New Hampshire coastline. Complex bathymetry and the irregular configuration of the northern New England coast (Fig. 1) allow for a large range of atmospheric and tidal conditions through localized channeling effects of wind and water. Availability of real-time tide data traditionally has been limited to the Portland Harbor tide gage, which is problematic when forecasting over a large, data-sparse coastline. The benchmark for the onset of flooding for this gage is 12 feet (3.7 m).

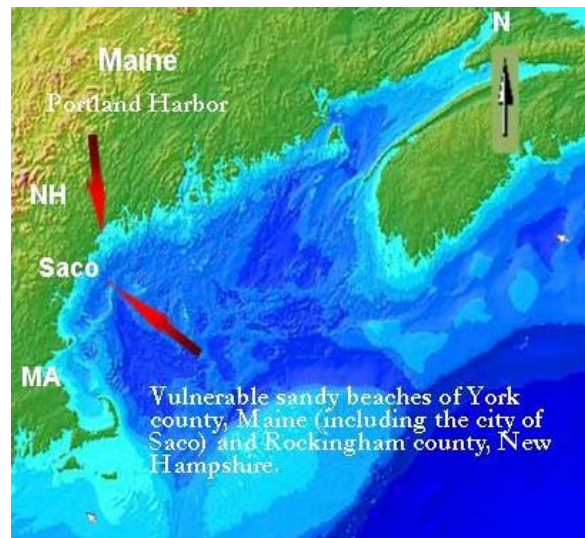


Figure 1: Bathymetry and topography within and surrounding the Gulf of Maine.

To complicate this issue, significant damage can occur with water levels below flood stage during splash-over events. Splash-over can be described as damage driven by large waves “over-topping” obstacles resulting in beach erosion, whereas coastal flooding is the “inundation of land areas adjacent to bodies of salt water” (NWS 2006). These challenges are becoming increasingly magnified as the population swells near vulnerable beaches and epoch surveys show gradual sea level rises (NOS 2006). Coastal storms significantly impact the marine community and pose a risk of billions of dollars in personal property damage (NOAA 1998).

The relative infrequency of these events increases forecaster reliance on storm surge models. Statistical and dynamical guidance is readily available, but can have large numerical and temporal errors and is only available in select locations. Therefore, in an effort to better understand and depict the wide range of tide levels and environmental conditions associated with coastal flooding, a coastal flood climatology was created for forecasters and emergency managers. Although not directly calculated as part of the climatology, an introduction into the Ekman Spiral, the role of wave set-up, wave run-up and the effects of atmospheric pressure were also introduced. When coupled together, these environmental conditions can create large storm tides in northern New England.

### ***1.2 The Paradox of Splash-over Versus Coastal Inundation***

Splash-over can cause significant damage especially along sandy beaches, yet in the absence of tidal inundation, it is not considered a warnable event by National Weather Service (NWS) standards. Many locations along the East coast experience this phenomenon as wave action interacts with

man-made obstacles. In Saco, Maine for example, the community of Camp Ellis is particularly vulnerable to splash-over, in part due to the construction of nineteenth century summer homes on eroding, sandy beachheads (Scontras 1993). Computer generated wave simulations show beach erosion in this region may also be locally enhanced by the refraction and super-positioning of focused wave energy along a nearby jetty (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 2006).

## **2. DATA/METHODOLOGY**

A catalog of coastal flood episodes was established. All events which produced flood damage along coastal Maine and New Hampshire were extracted from Storm Data Publication (NCDC 2007) for the period 1914-2007. This was challenging as minor versus moderate and severe coastal flood events are also not well defined or easily distinguishable when querying Storm Data Publication. Resolving which tide cycle caused flooding was also occasionally unclear.

A local research archive of the top ten tides and tidal surges ever recorded in Portland Harbor (Budd 1980) was then appended to this list to produce a robust catalogue of 103 events. The list was almost exclusively comprised of non-tropical systems, except for hurricane Carol (1954). A data worksheet was compiled for each event and contained available buoy wind and wave information, predicted versus observed tides, storm track and severity as well as surge guidance. In 35 modern events (1980-2007), the precise time of observed high tide was available for comparison with the predicted high tide (NOS 2007). High temporal resolution (six minute) tide data became available in 1996.

Observed tide levels from Portland Harbor



### 3.2 Historical Return Periods and Tide Statistics

A local historical archive (1914-2007) suggested coastal Maine and New Hampshire were overdue for a significant coastal flood event. The return period for the Portland Harbor tide gage reaching 13.0 feet (3.96 m) is approximately once every 10 years (Budd 1980). The last time this stage was reached was during the Patriot’s Day storm (16 April, 2007), when the gage topped out at 13.28 feet (4.05 m). The highest tide ever recorded was 14.17 feet (4.32 m) during the Blizzard of 1978 (7 February, 1978). A tidal surge of 3.5 feet (1.07 m) averages about once every 10 years as well. The last storm to produce a surge of this magnitude was the “Perfect Storm” (30 October, 1991).

The onset of flooding occurs in Portland, Maine when the harbor tide gage exceeds a benchmark of 12 feet. This coastal flood reference can often be accurately extrapolated to predict coastal flood conditions along nearby shorelines. However, localized wind and wave conditions have produced flooding in the Portland area despite water levels below the 12 foot tidal reference point.

The average observed height of the tide during coastal flood events in this study was 12.34 feet (3.75 m), however seven flood events (16%) occurred at water elevations below the 12 foot benchmark in Portland Harbor (1980-2007) (Fig. 4a).

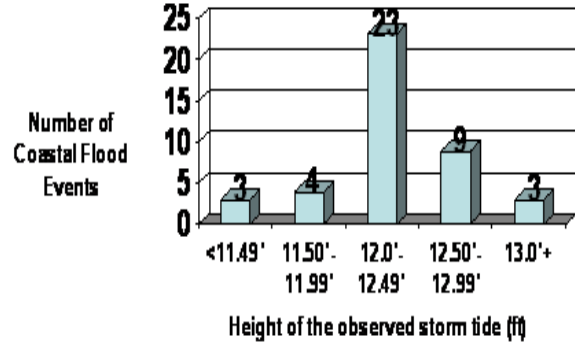


Figure 4a: Height of the observed storm tide during coastal flood events in Portland Harbor (1980-2007). Note seven flood events occurred below the Portland Harbor 12 foot flood stage.

Predicted astronomical tides were then compared to observed water levels during coastal flood events. This subset revealed astronomical water levels between 11.0 and 12.0 feet (3.35 – 3.66 m) were initially anticipated prior to nearly half of the flood events (48%) (Fig. 4b).

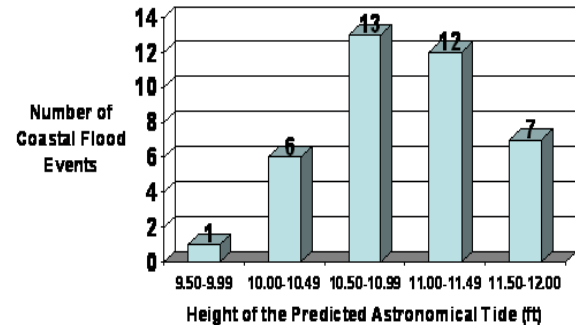
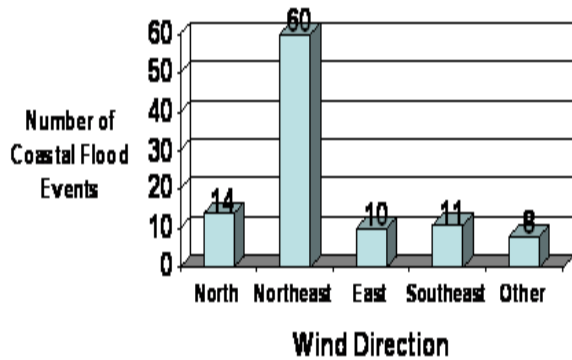


Figure 4b: Same as figure 4a, except the graph depicts height of the predicted (not observed) astronomical tide during coastal flood events in Portland Harbor (1980-2007).

### 3.3 The Role of Wind and the Effect of the Ekman Spiral

Wind direction from near shore buoys were examined for each coastal flood event. A northeast wind direction accompanied 60 (58%) events (Fig. 5). This wind direction is

parallel to topographical and bathymetrical features within and surrounding the Gulf of Maine (Fig. 1).



**Figure 5: Prevailing wind direction during coastal flood event by category along the Maine and New Hampshire coastline (1914-2007). A northeast wind direction is mainly parallel to the Maine and New Hampshire coasts.**

Some experts have correlated wind direction and tidal surge with the Ekman Spiral (Sobien and Paxton 1998). During long-lived, large scale “northeasters” located off the Eastern seaboard, water is forcibly piled up along the Maine and New Hampshire coastline as the Coriolis effect deflects shallow water to the right (towards the coast). Normally this water would evacuate in a deep ocean circulation. However, in shallow water, the introduction of bathymetrical features interrupts this circulation, resulting in an increased surge of water near the shoreline. This effect requires time to develop and is not applicable to fast moving systems such as accelerating, small diameter, tropical cyclones (Sobien and Paxton 1998). This team found the Ekman Spiral can have a pronounced effect of twice the magnitude due to onshore winds. This is counterintuitive to meteorologists who have been trained to expect onshore winds to produce the greatest contribution of storm surge.

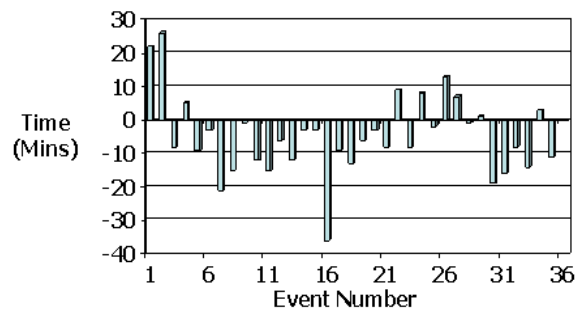
Surge produced by the Ekman Spiral was not calculated for this study. However, the

frequency of northeast flow events during coastal flooding (Fig. 5) suggests this phenomenon may play an important role in Maine and New Hampshire coastal flooding and future research is recommended.

### 3.4 The Relationship of Tide Cycles and Tidal Piling

The precise onset time of the peak storm tides that produced flooding was available for 35 events (1996-2007). In 21 cases (60%), the peak storm tide occurred within 10 minutes of the predicted high tide (Fig. 6). This is not surprising as a “sloshing effect” of an incoming tide often causes maximum storm surge to be nearly coincident with high tide (Wei 2007).

Comparing Onset Time of Peak Observed Storm Tide versus Predicted High Tide



**Figure 6: Difference in time of peak observed versus predicted high tide (1980-2007). Negative values denote an earlier than expected peak high tide.**

The cumulative affect of increasing water levels over successive tides (tidal piling), may have contributed to coastal flooding during several events. Tidal cycles exhibiting back-to-back coastal flooding were noted in ten (29%) modern events where high temporal resolution tide data was available.

The relationship between steady state atmospheric conditions and storm surge (the difference between storm tide and



astronomical tide) may aid meteorologists in the predictability of coastal flooding. To determine whether storm surge could be successfully extrapolated sequentially from tide to tide, the surge at peak storm tide versus the preceding low tide cycle was compared. In fourteen cases (40%), the greatest storm surge varied considerably leading up to coastal flood events (Fig. 7). However, 21 events (60 %) depicted storm surges during flooding to be similar to the previous tidal cycle.

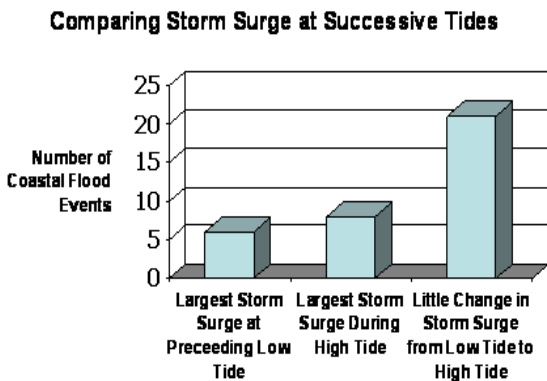


Figure 7: A comparison of the storm surge at low tide with the following successive high tide (1996-2007)

### 3.5 The Role of Large Waves, Wave Run-up and Wave Set-up during Coastal Flooding

Wave characteristics can affect coastal damage. Large, long period waves contain a disproportionately greater amount of energy when compared to smaller waves. Also, within a wave spectrum, the largest of breaking waves cause significant wave run-up along the beaches, thereby increasing the threat of coastal damage. In addition, wave setup can allow for splash-over or coastal flooding despite the absence of a wind driven surge. Wave setup is the transfer of potential energy of waves within the shoaling zone as it is converted to kinetic energy released by the breakers. This focused energy can increase near-shore water levels by a magnitude of 10-

15 percent of the shoaling breaker height (NOAA 2006).

An empirical relationship between storm tide and large ocean waves was created for the climatology (Fig. 8).

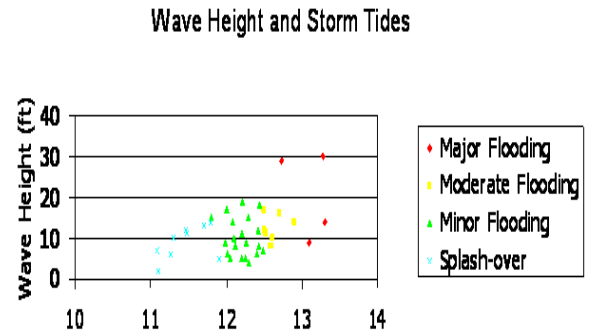


Figure 8: A plot of wave height versus storm tide during all coastal flood and splash-over events (1980-2007). Major flooding was associated with large ocean waves and significant storm tides.

Wave heights from marine observations nearest the coastal flooding or splash-over along the Maine and New Hampshire coasts were examined (Fig. 2). As wave heights increased, there was a greater risk of localized splash-over or coastal flood conditions despite tide heights below the 12 foot flood stage in Portland Harbor (1980-2007).

### 3.6 The Secondary Role of Atmospheric Pressure

Storm surge is predominantly driven by wind with a secondary influence of atmospheric pressure (Harris 1963). However, atmospheric pressure accounts for a one foot (0.3 m) response (rise) in ocean level for every 30 mb of surface pressure drop. This magnitude of pressure drop may be used as an initial approximation during intense northern latitude cyclogenesis, however cold, dense water can offset (dampen) this variable (Sobien and Paxton 1998).

Deep, long-lived cyclones accompanied all three modern day severe coastal flood cases including the “Perfect Storm” (1991), however the effects of pressure on water levels were not explicitly calculated in this study. Faster moving systems either did not coincide with peak astronomical tides or did not create the necessary wave height and Ekman Spiral contributions to cause significant flooding.

### ***3.7 Unusual Coastal Damage Situations Including the Effects of Extreme Rainfall***

There were a host of special situations which led to coastal damage, but may not have caused inundation and were therefore not included in the coastal flood climatology. Hurricanes well offshore can produce splash-over problems from powerful ocean waves, such as Hurricane Juan in 2003. Fourteen foot (4.3 m) swells reached the southwest coast of Maine, causing significant splash-over damage in Saco, Maine on 29 September. An unusual gravity wave occurred during the 4 January, 1994 coastal storm (Bosart 1998). This allowed for a surge of seawater to produce coastal flooding during half tide as the rapidly rising water damaged boats moored in river-mouths. Damage during the infamous blizzard of February, 1978 was preceded by a major northeaster. This precursor northeaster was included in the coastal flood climatology, but is unique. The storm exacerbated conditions by destroying protective dunes and seawalls in advance of the February storm throughout coastal Maine and New Hampshire. It was the second highest tide ever recorded in Portland Harbor at 13.98 feet (4.3 m).

Another unusual coastal flood event may occur with tide gage readings significantly below the standard Portland Harbor flood stage during extreme rainfall events. This

phenomenon coincided with the extraordinary rainfall events of October 1996 and 1998. In these cases, rainfall in excess of a foot caused localized, severe flooding in the vicinity of Portland (Fig. 1). As recently as May, 2006, extreme rainfall produced isolated, yet severe coastal flooding in York County, Maine. During these rare events, fresh water runoff near estuaries and the mouths of rivers can interact with the incoming tide (EPA 2006). Water in the estuary or river may back up and enhance flooding in low lying areas.

## **4 STORM SURGE GUIDANCE**

### ***4.1 The MRPECS and MRPSSE Products***

There are two surge models used operationally in the NWS. First, the Nested Grid Model (NGM) produces statistical Marine Product-East Coast Storm Surge guidance (MRPECS) (NCEP 2005). Storm surge is forecast using sea-level pressures at NGM grid points. Therefore tidal surges are indirectly resolved through this model as wind forecasts are not explicitly used as predictors.

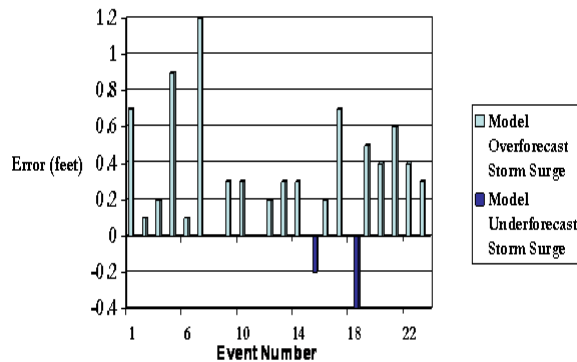
Also available are Marine Product Storm Surge East (MRPSSE) guidance derived from the Global Forecast System (GFS) model. This dynamical storm surge guidance employs shallow water equations similar to the Sea, Lake and Overland Surges from Hurricanes (SLOSH) model with high-resolution bathymetry and coastal topography (Eberwine 2005). The model’s accuracy in forecasting storm surge is highly dependent on the lowest winds from the lowest sigma-level (30 m).

Storm surge guidance was examined, despite very limited archived information. The two operational model runs (00 UTC and 12 UTC) immediately prior to each flood event were averaged and compared to the actual storm surge. All of the events revealed nearly

identical back to back storm surge forecasts from run to run. This individual model consistency offers operational utility to forecasting storm surges.

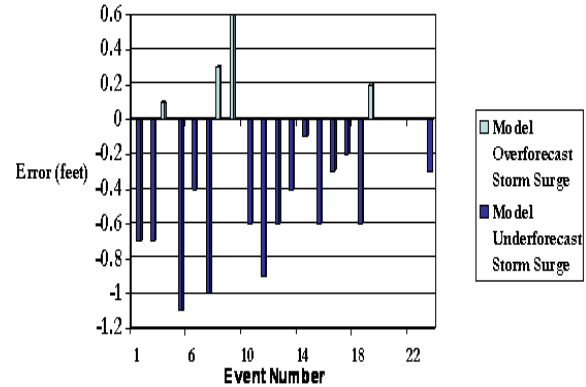
#### 4.2 Model Bias

In a limited dataset of 23 events, (MRPECS; NGM based) guidance consistently over-forecast tidal surge in nineteen cases, while in two events the guidance matched observed surge. On average, the guidance over-forecast storm surge by 0.3 feet (0.09 m) (Fig. 9a)



**Figure 9a:** Error (in feet) of the NGM storm surge guidance (MRPECS) during coastal flood events in Portland Harbor (1996-2007).

This error is relatively large, considering the average storm surge predicted during these events was 1.4 feet (0.43 m). The opposite was true for the Marine Product Storm Surge East (MRPSEE; GFS based), product which under-forecast most events and showed an equal and opposite forecast surge bias of 0.3 feet (Fig. 9b).



**Figure 9b:** The same as figure 9a, except graph depicts GFS based storm surge guidance (MRPSEE).

This suggests a blend of surge guidance may be appropriate at times during “steady-state” synoptic situations, where large scale wind patterns are consistently captured by numerical models during long-lived events. Forecasters should proceed with caution however, as the most accurate surge forecast will be highly dependent upon an individual models ability to accurately predict storm track and intensity.

## 5. CONCLUSION

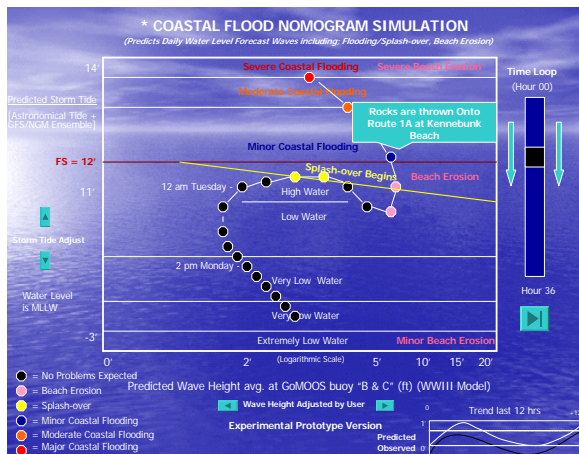
The 12 foot tidal benchmark in Portland Harbor has provided an initial approximation for the onset of coastal flooding for adjacent coastal regions. However, the climatology and conceptual models present additional insight into the broad range of varying environmental conditions necessary for coastal flooding. There are a number of unusual and extreme cases which can cause damage within this spectrum. This includes the more common phenomena of splash-over, which is treated separately from coastal inundation.

Forecaster and emergency management experience with coastal flooding may be limited due to the relatively infrequent nature of coastal flood events. These findings can



serve to increase meteorologist's confidence during the warning process and assist emergency managers in preparedness. A storm tide-wave height relationship has been incorporated into a decision aid for guidance purposes in local operations.

Future work will focus on the creation of a web based, coastal flood nomogram. This graphic will display computed storm tides by coupling astronomical tides with a storm surge ensemble prediction from the MRPSSE and MRPECS products. Predicted wave heights will then be calculated for near-shore buoys from the Wave Watch III model and plotted at hourly intervals (Fig. 10).



**Figure 10: Experimental Coastal Flood Nomogram depicting predicted storm tide versus predicted wave height.**

With this methodology, the synergistic effects of extreme tides and large battering waves could be better visualized by users. The plot would incorporate the relationship between coastal flooding, splash-over and beach erosion based on the coastal flood climatology and a splash-over database. A prototype for this interactive, experimental tool has been created by GoMOOS.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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