

USGS Streamgages Under Threat

BY PHIL BROWN

One of the more amazing statistics to emerge from Tropical Storm Irene was that the East Branch of the Ausable crested at 18.43 feet in Ausable Forks—three feet higher than the previous record and more than eleven feet above flood stage. The river's flow peaked at fifty thousand cubic feet per second, a hundred times greater than normal.

Just a few months after the record storm, the U.S. Geological Survey is warning that it will be forced to discontinue most of the streamgages in the Lake Champlain basin on March 1 unless funding can be found to keep them going.

Throughout New York State, the USGS plans to discontinue thirty-one gages, including nine in or near the Adirondack Park. (The USGS uses the spelling "gages" rather than "gauges.")

The gage that measured the record crest on the East Branch of the Ausable is not on the chopping block, not yet anyway. However, one nearby that is at risk has been in operation for more than eighty years, longer than any of other gages scheduled to be discontinued.

"We've got eighty-two years of records at this site. It is important for determining how flows are changing over time," said Ward Freeman, director of the USGS New York Water Science Center in Troy. The center's website contains real-time data from rivers throughout the state.

Streamgages measure the height and flow of rivers. Data are used to predict floods, calculate nutrient pollution, assess conditions for paddling, and determine when it's appropriate to put lampricide in tributaries of Lake Champlain.

John Sheehan, spokesman for the Adirondack Council, warned that without stream data, riverside communities will find it more difficult to protect themselves. "We won't know what the changes in a river's height and volume are, and as a result we can't plan for flooding events," he said.

In the past, many gages were funded through congressional earmarks, but lawmakers eliminated the earmarks a few years ago to save money, Freeman said. He added that the USGS needs \$134,000 to keep the nine North Country gauges operational. (Each gage costs about \$15,000 a year to operate and maintain.)

Eight of the gages are on rivers that feed Lake Champlain. Besides the Ausable, they are the Great Chazy, Little Ausable, Salmon, Boquet, Mettawee, and Putnam Creek. The ninth is on a narrow part of Lake Champlain itself near Whitehall.

Gages on another dozen rivers in Vermont that feed Lake Champlain also are scheduled to be shut down. Four others were discontinued in October.

This year, USGS was able to keep the gages on Lake Champlain tributaries running only after obtaining financial assistance from the Lake Champlain Basin Program. Freeman said he hopes the Lake Champlain organization and other interested parties can come up with money again.

“We’re going to do all we can to save these gages,” Freeman said.

Eric Howe, a technical coordinator for the basin program, said the non-profit organization will do everything it can to keep the gages operational, but it’s too early to tell if the group will have enough funds. Last year it spent about \$150,000 to keep the gages running.

“The gages were extremely important during Tropical Storm Irene,” Howe said. “They helped us see what the tributaries were doing in the flooding.”

Thanks to a gage on the Winooski River, he said, farmers were able to round up volunteers to harvest crops in advance of floods.

Freeman is asking those willing to contribute funding for the gages to call him or Rob Breault at 518-285-5658 or email dc_ny@usgs.gov.

[Click here](#) to read the Adirondack Explorer's comprehensive coverage of Tropical Storm Irene.