

Evidence essay · Land and freshwater

How much water is in that snow?

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ABSTRACT

Snow water equivalent is distinguished from depth, snowfall, cover extent, and season length through two hypothetical snowpacks of equal depth but different density. Their contrasting water stores show why one fixed depth-to-water conversion can mislead. The essay examines settling, redistribution, sampling losses, hard layers, gauge undercatch, and changing regional coverage using the cited NOAA snow assessment and National Weather Service guidance. It contrasts weather-station siting with catchment surveys, where natural drifts, shrubs, hollows, and their area weights may be essential rather than inconvenient outliers. An inaccessible accumulation remains missing, not zero. Finally, stored snow water is separated from a flood forecast because release depends on weather, infiltration, refreezing, and flow paths. A useful summary names the quantity, terrain, date, and decision before comparing winters.

Keywords: snow water equivalent · snow density · wind redistribution · catchment sampling · runoff

Adapted from the Still North field journal. Original article. A source-based editorial text, not a report of original Still North research. Examples and imagery are illustrative.

Two snowpacks can reach the same mark on a measuring stick and hold quite different amounts of water. One may be loose and airy; the other settled, wind-packed, or layered with ice. Depth is a useful measurement, but it is not the same as the water available to melt. That difference matters when interpreting spring runoff, ground insulation, or a claim about a snowy winter.

There are also different things to count: new snowfall, the total snow already on the ground, the area covered by snow, and the length of the snow season. None is a substitute for all the others. A landscape can receive substantial winter snow and still lose its spring cover early.

Translate depth into a water layer

Snow water equivalent, usually shortened to SWE, is the depth of water obtained by melting a snowpack over the same area. It depends on snow depth and bulk density. The NOAA Arctic Report Card snow chapter distinguishes SWE from snow-cover extent and duration, using each to describe a different part of the season.

Consider two illustrative snowpacks, not field observations. The density here is the average through the full pack, including its different layers.

A core sample of known area, weighed or melted with appropriate equipment, can constrain water content directly. Assuming one fixed conversion from depth to water would miss the twofold difference above.

Settling can reduce snow depth without removing the same proportion of water. Wind can remove snow from one place and deposit it elsewhere without any new precipitation. Melting and drainage change the water stored. A falling depth reading therefore needs a process explanation,

not an automatic translation into lost snowfall or river discharge.

Decide which landscape the sample represents

The US National Weather Service measurement guidance stresses consistent timing, careful siting, and several readings where wind makes accumulation uneven. It also distinguishes total snow depth from new snowfall. These are observing-programme procedures, not a ready-made Arctic catchment design, but the underlying lesson travels well: the location and definition of a measurement shape its meaning.

For a catchment water budget, natural drifts are part of the landscape, not inconvenient extremes to delete. A survey may need to sample exposed ridges, hollows, shrub patches, and late-lying snowbeds, then account for how much area each occupies. For a standard weather-station snowfall record, the siting rules serve a different purpose. Borrowing the rules without the purpose can produce a tidy but unrepresentative average.

A fixed sensor has another footprint. It may faithfully record a drift that forms beneath it every year while missing changes elsewhere. A repeat transect may cover more terrain but still miss the deepest accumulation if access becomes unsafe. Record those limits. Do not turn an inaccessible drift into a zero, and do not imply that a convenient route sampled every surface type equally.

A core can lose material during collection or stop above the ground at a hard layer. A probe can mistake vegetation or ice for the base of the pack. Wind reduces the catch of falling snow in gauges. Repeated readings and field notes

Snowpack	Depth	Mean density	Water equivalent
A	40 cm	200 kilograms per cubic metre	80 mm
B	40 cm	400 kilograms per cubic metre	160 mm

can reveal some of these problems, but making the ruler more precise cannot repair a survey that leaves out an entire terrain class.

Regional products face their own constraints. NOAA's 2024 assessment combines several snow analyses because ground observations alone are sparse across the Arctic. The chapter explains why one satellite-assisted SWE product is excluded from its May and June analysis as station availability declines. Changing coverage is part of the method, not a detail that should disappear behind a smooth map.

Water stored is not a flood forecast

SWE describes a store at a given time. The timing and rate of release also depend on weather, melt energy, rain, infiltration, refreezing, and the routes water takes through the catchment. A large store can melt gradually; a smaller store can contribute to a sharp pulse. An assessment of downstream risk needs those conditions as well as the snow measurement.

The next question depends on the decision. For runoff, read [Permafrost and freshwater](#) for the flow-path context. For a comparison between winters, use the metadata principles in [Open observations](#). A defensible snow summary names the quantity, terrain, date, and coverage before calling one winter snowier than another.

References

1. NOAA Arctic Report Card snow chapter (arctic.noaa.gov)
2. US National Weather Service measurement guidance ([weather.gov](https://www.weather.gov))