Real-Time Spatial Estimates of Snow-Water Equivalent (SWE)

Sierra Nevada Mountains, California

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Team: Noah Molotch[1,2], Leanne Lestak[1], Dominik Schneider[1], and Keith Musselman[1]
[1] Center for Water, Earth Science & Technology, Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research, Uni. of Colorado Boulder
[2] Jet Propulsion Laboratory, California Institute of Technology
Contact: Leanne.Lestak@colorado.edu

About this report

This is an experimental research product that provides near-real-time estimates of snow-water equivalent (SWE) at a spatial resolution of 500 m for the Sierra Nevada in California from mid-winter through the melt season. The report is released within a week of the date of data acquisition at the top of the report. A similar report covering the Intermountain West, makes its debut this season and will be distributed to water managers in Colorado, Utah and Wyoming.

The spatial SWE analysis method for the Sierra Nevada uses the following data as inputs:

- In-situ SWE from all operational CA snow gage sensor sites
- MODSCAG fractional snow-covered area (fSCA) data from recent cloud-free MODIS satellite images
- Physiographic information (elevation, latitude, upwind mountain barriers, slope, etc.)
- Historical daily SWE patterns (2000-2014) retrospectively generated using historical MODSCAG data and an energy-balance model that back-calculates SWE given the fSCA time-series and meltout date for each pixel

For more details on the estimation method see the *Methods* section below. Please be sure to read the *Data Issues / Caveats* section for a discussion of persistent challenges or flagged uncertainties of the SWE product. The modeled conditions could be sensitive to the regression algorithm and data input and availability.

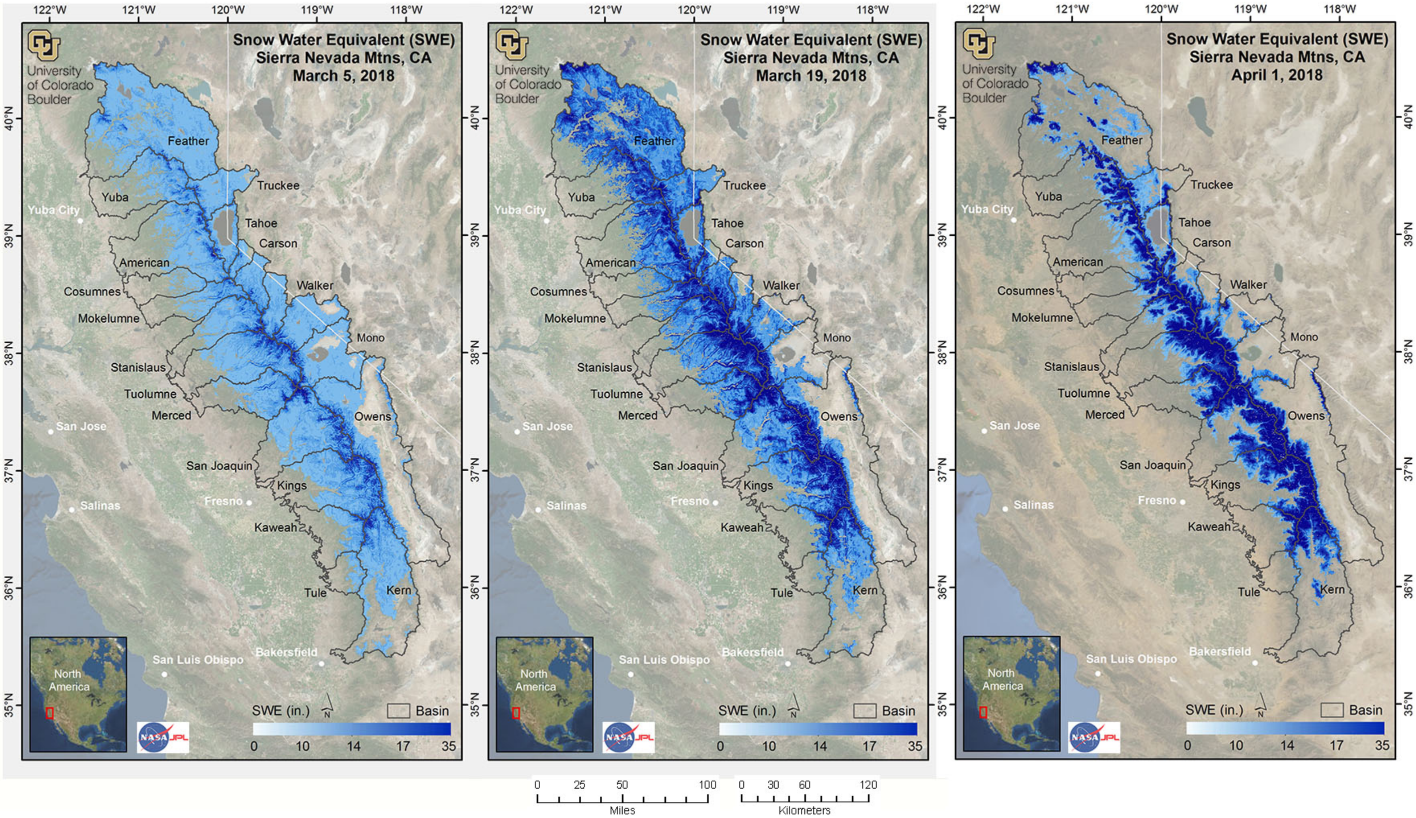

Figure 1. Estimated SWE across the Sierra Nevada. *SWE amounts for March 5, 2018 (left), March 19th* (middle), and April 1st (right).

The value of spatially explicit estimates of SWE

Snowmelt makes up the large majority (~60-85%) of the annual streamflow in the Sierra Nevada. The spatial distribution of snow-water equivalent (SWE) across the landscape is complex. While broad aspects of this spatial pattern (e.g., more SWE at higher elevations and on north-facing exposures) are fairly consistent, the details vary a lot from year to year, influencing the magnitude and timing of snowmelt-driven runoff.

SWE is operationally monitored at just over a hundred snow gage sensor sites spread across the Sierra Nevada, providing a critical first-order snapshot of conditions, and the basis for runoff forecasts from the CA DWR, NRCS, and NOAA. However, conditions at snow sensor sites (e.g., percent of normal SWE) may not be representative of conditions in the large areas between these point measurements, and at elevations above and below the range of the sensor sites. The spatial snow analysis creates a detailed picture of the spatial pattern of SWE using snow sensors, satellite, and other data, extending beyond the snow sensor sites to unmonitored areas.

Interpreting the spatial SWE estimates in the context of SNOTEL

The spatial product estimates SWE for every pixel where the MODSCAG product identifies snow-cover. Comparatively, snow sensor samples 8-20 points per basin within a narrower elevation range. Thus, the basin-wide percent of average from the spatial SWE estimates is not directly comparable with the snow sensor basin-wide percent of average. A better comparison might be made with the % average in the elevation bands (Table 2) that contain snow sensor sites.

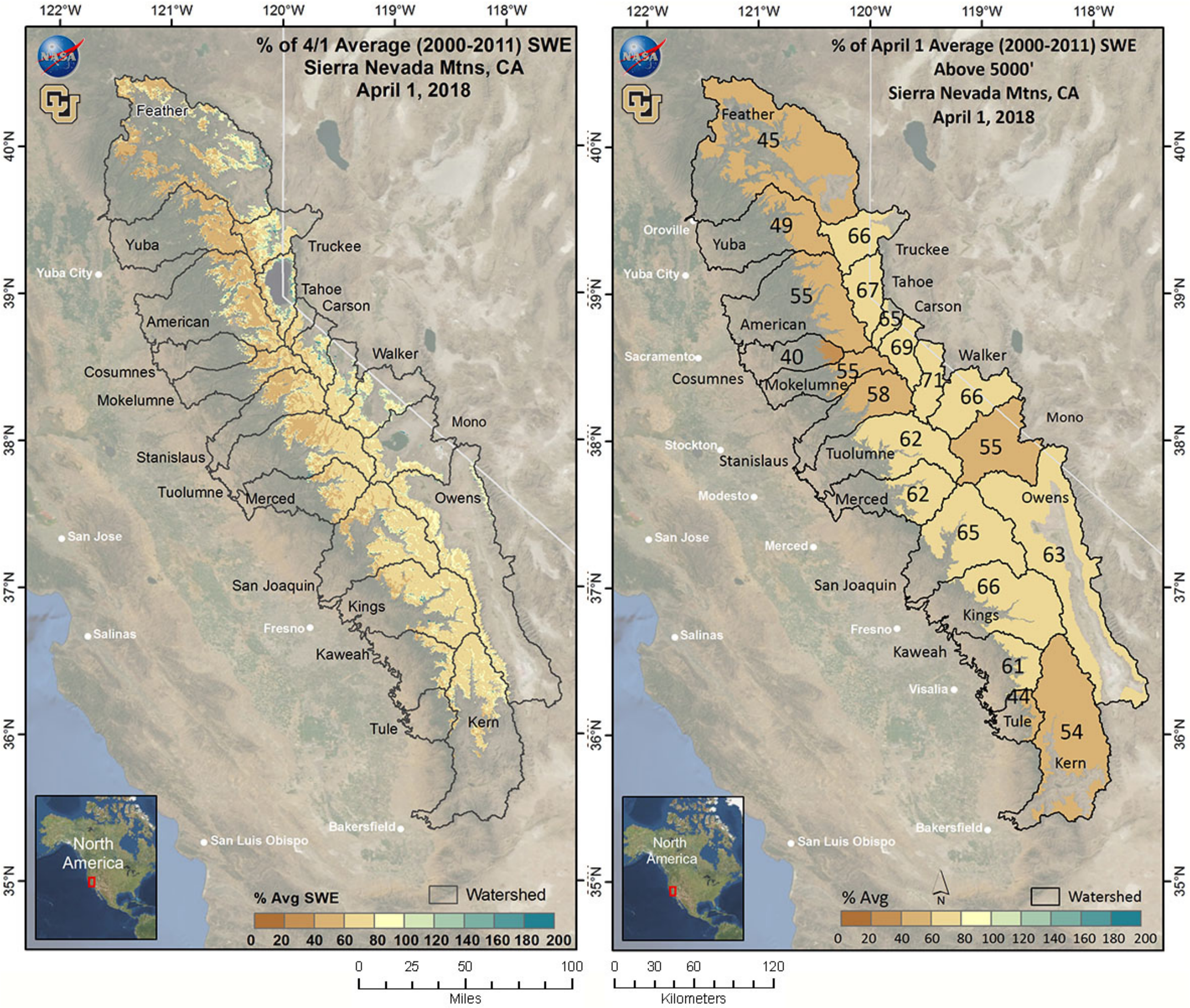

***Figure 2*. Estimated % of average SWE across the Sierra Nevada.** *Percent of average (2000-2011) SWE for April 1, 2018 for the Sierra Nevada, calculated for each pixel (left) and basinwide (right). Basinwide percent of average is calculated across all model pixels >5000' elevation.*

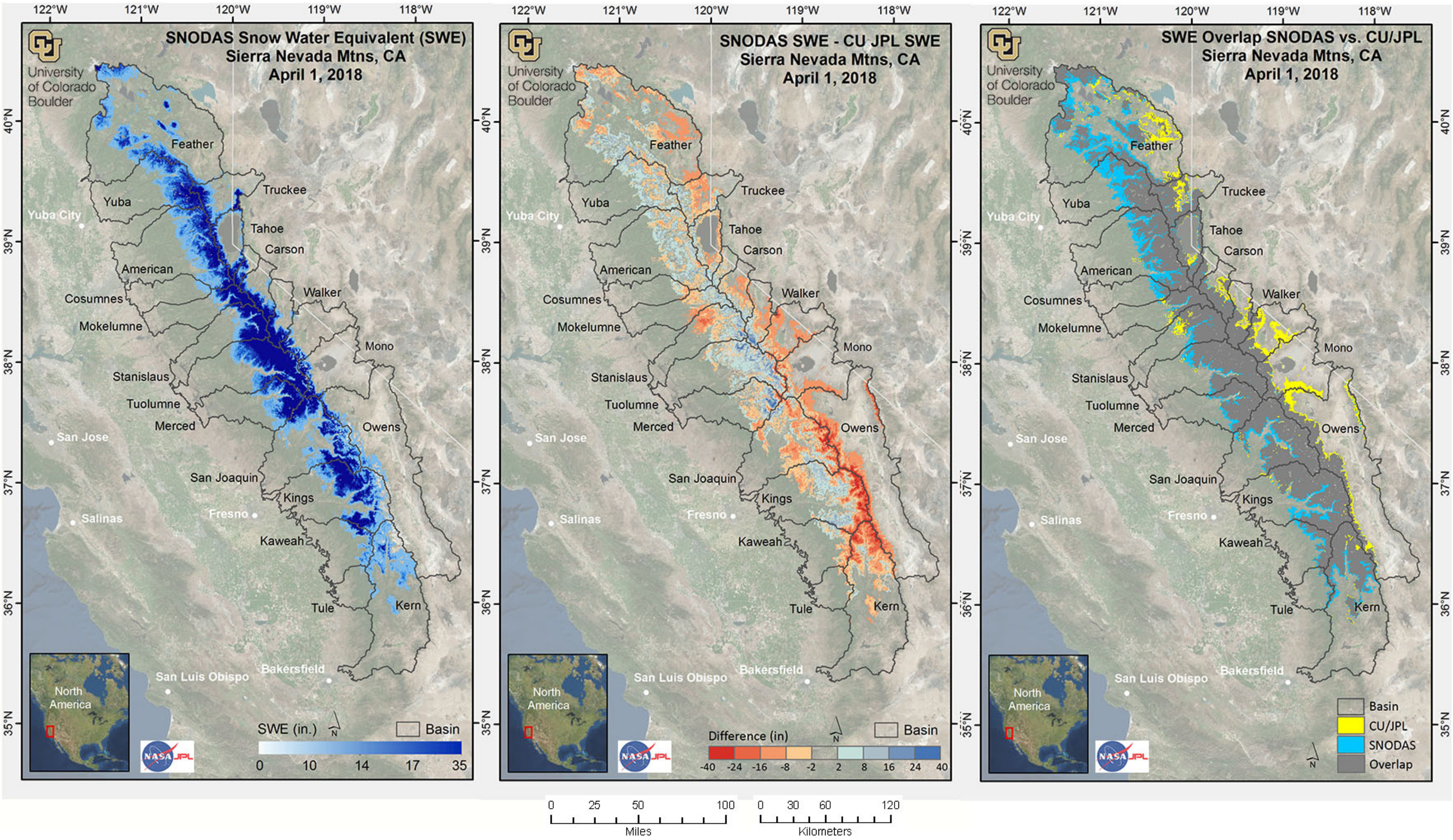

Figure 3. Comparison of CU/JPL regression SWE vs. SNODAS SWE for the Sierra Nevada. *The map on the left shows April 1st SNODAS SWE. The middle map shows the difference between the April 1st SNODAS SWE and CU/JPL regression SWE estimate. Red pixels denote areas where SNODAS SWE is less than CU/JPL SWE and blue pixels show areas where SNODAS SWE is higher than CU/JPL SWE. The map on the right shows the extent of the snow-covered for the SNODAS SWE product and the CU/JPL SWE estimate. Yellow pixels show where the location of CU/JPL snow extends beyond the location of the SNODAS snow extent. Blue pixels show where the SNODAS snow extends beyond the CU/JPL snow extent. Gray areas show the overlap between the 2 products.*

location of the SNODAS snow extent. Blue pixels show where the SNODAS snow extends beyond the CU/JPL snow extent. Gray areas indicate regions where both products agree on the snow-cover extent.

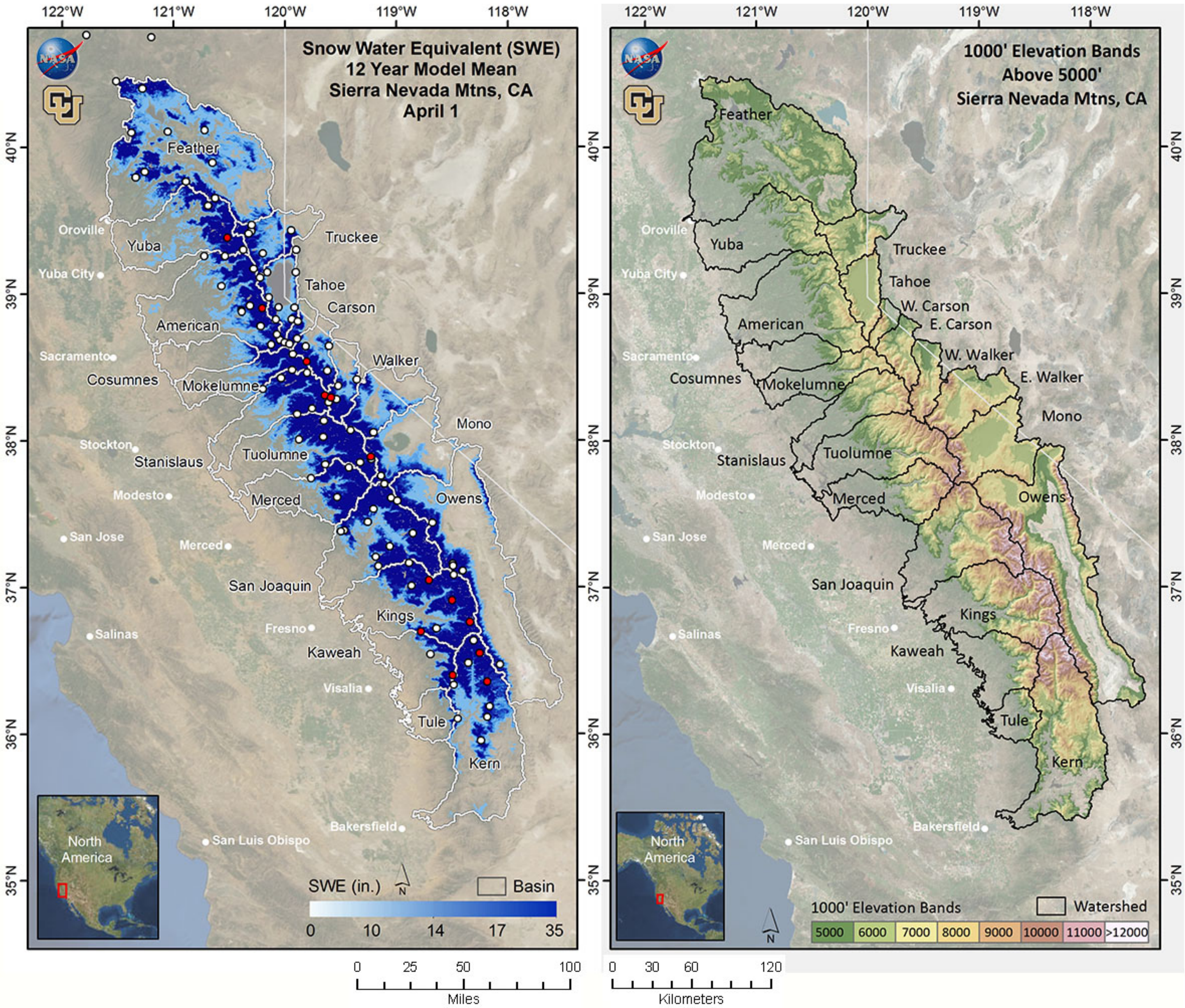

Figure 4. Mean SWE and Elevation Bands for the Sierra Nevada. *Mean SWE (2000-2011) amounts for April 1st (left), and Banded Elevation map identifies basins used in this report (black boundaries) and 1000' elevation bands (colored shading) that match those used in Table 1 and Table 2. Map on left shows snow gage sensor sites recording SWE on April 1, 2018 (white) and sites that were offline are shown in red.*

Methods

The spatial SWE estimation method is described in Schneider and Molotch (2016). The method uses linear regression in which the dependent variable is derived from the operationally measured in situ SWE from all online snow sensor sites in the domain. The snow sensor SWE observations are scaled by the fractional snow-covered area (fSCA) across the 500 m pixel containing that snow sensor site before being used in the linear regression model. The fSCA is a near-real-time cloud-free MODIS satellite image which has been processed using the MODIS Snow Cover and Grain size (MODSCAG) fractional snow-covered area algorithm program (Painter, et. al. 2009, snow.jpl.nasa.gov).

The following independent variables (predictors) enter into the linear regression model:

- Physiographic variables that affect snow accumulation, melt, and redistribution, including elevation, latitude, upwind mountain barriers, slope, and others. See Figure 2 in Schneider and Molotch (2016) for the full set of these variables.
- The historical daily SWE pattern (2000-2014) retrospectively generated using historical MODSCAG data, and an energy-balance model that back-calculates SWE given the fractional Snow-Covered Area (fSCA) time series and meltout date for each pixel. See Guan, et. al., 2013 for details. (For computational efficiency, only one image from either the 1st or 15th of

each month during the 2000-2014 period that best matches the real-time SNOTEL-observed pattern is selected as an independent variable.)

The real-time regression model for this date has been validated by cross-validation, whereby 10% of the SNOTEL data are randomly removed and the model prediction is compared to the measured value at the removed SNOTEL stations. This is repeated 30 times to obtain an average R-squared value, which denotes how closely the model fits the SNOTEL data. During development of this regression method, the model was also validated against independent historical SWE data collected in snow surveys at 9 locations in Colorado, and an intensive field survey in north-central Colorado.

List of All Known Data Issues/Caveats

- RECENT SNOWFALL – There are occasionally problems with lower-elevation SWE estimates due to recent snowfall events that result in extensive snow-cover extending to valley locations where measurements are not available. This scenario results in an over-estimation of lower- elevation SWE.
- LIMITED SNOW PILLOW DATA – When snow at the snow pillow sites melts out, but remains at higher elevations, the model tends to underestimate SWE at the under-monitored upper elevations. This issue typically occurs late in the melt season, resulting in less accurate SWE prediction at higher elevations compared to earlier in the snow season.
- CLOUD COVER – Cloud cover can obscure satellite measurements of snow-cover. While careful checks are made, occasionally the misclassification of clouds as snow or *vice versa* may result in the mischaracterization of SWE or bare-ground.
- LOW LOOK ANGLE – When a satellite does not pass directly over a region but the area is still included within the satellite sensor's field of view, this is referred to as a low "look angle". The resulting image has lower effective resolution – this "blurry" MODSCAG data still contains useful information but may lead to overestimation of SWE near the margins of the snow-cover extent.
- POOR QUALITY SNOTEL DATA – Although data QA/QC is performed, occasional SNOTEL sensor malfunction may result in localized SWE errors.
- ANOMALOUS SNOW PATTERNS – Anomalous snow years or snow distributions may cause SWE error due to the model design to search for similar SWE distributions from previous years. If no close seasonal analogue exists, the model is forced to find the most similar year, which may result in error.
- DENSE FOREST COVER – Dense forest cover at lower elevations where snow-cover is discontinuous can cause the satellite to underestimate the snow-cover extent, leading to underestimation of SWE.

References and Additional Sources

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