During the 20th century, floods were the number one natural disaster in the U.S. in terms of number of lives lost and property damage. Virginia experienced eight major floods, four of which affected Roanoke.

**Major floods in the Roanoke River basin**

- August 19-20, 1969  
- June 21-24, 1972  
- November 4-5, 1985  
- September 6-7, 1996

**1985 Flood** - Heavy rainfall from October 31 through November 6, 1985, caused record-breaking floods over a large region, including western and northern Virginia. Most of the rain fell on November 4 and 5 and was indirectly related to Hurricane Juan. New maximum peak discharges were recorded at 63 streamgaging stations during this flood. In the Roanoke area, 10 people died as a result of the flood, 22 in Virginia. The cost of this flood for the Roanoke-Salem area was estimated to be $440 million.

**Major droughts in the Roanoke River basin**

What a USGS streamgage can tell us

USGS streamgages not only report current streamflow conditions, they also provide long-term data to evaluate the frequency and severity of floods and droughts at local and regional scales.

Streamflow data collection began at Roanoke River at Roanoke, Va., in February 1899:

- The maximum peak streamflow ever recorded at this gaging station--32,300 cubic feet per second--occurred on November 4, 1985 (see first graph below), as did the maximum stage (water-surface elevation) of 23.35 feet. Previous maximums were in 1972.
- The recurrence interval for the 1985 flood was about 175 years; that is, a flood of this magnitude has less than a 1% chance of occurring in any given year.
- The lowest daily mean streamflow value ever recorded at this gaging station--19 cubic feet per second--occurred on August 29, 1981 (see second graph).

Graphs showing more than 100 years of streamflow data

Real-time and historical streamflow information are available on the Internet from the USGS National Water Information System (NWIS) at http://water.usgs.gov/nwis/