



RESEARCH LETTER

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Key Points:

- High-impact hydrologic events (e.g., floods, flash floods, and debris flows) occur in conjunction with atmospheric rivers in California
- A majority of floods and debris flows occur in association with landfalling atmospheric rivers in the cold season over Northern California
- A majority of flash floods occur in association with a flow pattern that resembles the warm-season North American monsoon in Southern California

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High-impact hydrologic events and atmospheric rivers in California: An investigation using the NCEI Storm Events Database

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Abstract Atmospheric rivers (ARs) are long, narrow corridors of enhanced integrated water vapor and integrated vapor transport that can result in high-impact hydrologic events (HIHES) including floods, flash floods, and debris flows. This study examined the relationship between HIHES and ARs in California for 10 water years by using the National Centers for Environmental Information Storm Events Database and a catalog of landfalling ARs provided by Rutz et al. (2013). Results illustrated that HIHES related to floods and debris flows are commonly associated with ARs during the cold season across Northern California, whereas HIHES related to flash floods are commonly not associated with ARs during the warm season across Southern California. Composite analyses illustrated that HIHES associated with landfalling ARs are associated with synoptic-scale flow patterns that support southwesterly water vapor flux that aligns favorably with California coastal topography to maximize upslope flow and orographic precipitation.

1. Introduction

Floods, flash floods, and debris flows (e.g., shallow, rain-induced landslides) can be hazards associated with heavy precipitation. Floods are defined as the overflowing of water from normal confines or the accumulation of water in areas where water usually does not occur [American Meteorological Society (AMS), 2016a], and flash floods are defined as floods that occur more rapidly, with little to no warning [AMS, 2016b]. Debris flows are commonly defined as hybrids of landslides and floods that result in a flowing mixture of equal parts of sediment and water [NOAA-U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Debris Flow Task Force, 2005]. Floods and flash floods are responsible for 75% of all presidential disaster declarations in the U.S. [NOAA, 2016], whereas landslides, including debris flows, are responsible for 25–50 deaths and damages >\$2 billion annually in the U.S. [NOAA-USGS Debris Flow Task Force, 2005]. The purpose of this study is to investigate the synoptic-scale meteorological conditions associated with floods, flash floods, and debris flows (e.g., high-impact hydrological events (HIHES)) in California.

2. Background

Heavy precipitation events (e.g., 72 h precipitation accumulation >300–400 mm) over the U.S. are frequently caused by warm-season severe convective systems and tropical cyclones over the southern Plains and Southeast and by landfalling winter storms along the West Coast [Ralph and Dettinger, 2012]. The latter occur predominantly in conjunction with orographic precipitation in the warm sector of these winter storms along a corridor of enhanced atmospheric water vapor known as an atmospheric river (AR) [Ralph et al., 2004]. ARs are long, narrow corridors of enhanced integrated water vapor (IWV) and integrated vapor transport (IVT) that account for ~90% of all poleward moisture transported globally on only 10% of the global surface [Zhu and Newell, 1998; Ralph et al., 2004; Neiman et al., 2008a, 2008b; among others]. ARs typically contain IVT magnitudes of $\geq 250 \text{ kg m}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$ and IWV values of $\geq 20 \text{ mm}$ [Ralph et al., 2011] in a region >2000 km long and <1000 km wide [Zhu and Newell, 1998] that is found in the warm sector of extratropical cyclones, ahead of cold fronts, and along low-level jet streams [Zhu and Newell, 1998; Ralph et al., 2004; Bao et al., 2006; Stohl et al., 2008; Cordeira et al., 2013]. Water vapor flux along ARs commonly influences heavy precipitation over California during the cold season from October to March as their parent winter storms follow a more southerly storm track [Neiman et al., 2008b].

ARs that make landfall in California typically contain 75% of their water vapor transport in the lowest 2.25 km of the atmosphere [Ralph et al., 2005] and last for ~20–30 h [Ralph et al., 2013]. The low-level transport of

moisture along ARs from over the northeast Pacific toward the U.S. West Coast can result in intense orographic precipitation in the Coast Ranges, Transverse Ranges, and Sierra Nevada [Lin *et al.*, 2001; Ralph *et al.*, 2006; Smith *et al.*, 2010; among others]. Case studies of individual events have identified that the intensity and duration of orographic precipitation associated with landfalling ARs in regions of complex terrain can often result in HIHEs, especially over the western U.S. [Wieczorek and Glade, 2005; Restrepo *et al.*, 2008; Rutz *et al.*, 2013; among others]. The twin objectives of this study are to identify what fraction of California HIHEs are associated with landfalling ARs and to illustrate the synoptic-scale meteorological conditions associated with AR-related HIHEs.

3. Data and Methodology

This study focuses on reports of floods, flash floods, and debris flows obtained from the National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI) Storm Events Database [NCEI Storm Events Database, 2016] for 10 National Weather Service County Warning Areas (CWAs) over Northern and Southern California during a 10 water year (WY) period between 1 October 2004 and 30 September 2014. The five northern CWAs are overseen by the Monterey (MTR), Sacramento (STO), Eureka (EKA), Reno (REV), and Medford (MFR) weather forecast offices (WFOs), whereas the five southern CWAs are overseen by the Phoenix (PSR), San Diego (SGX), Los Angeles (LOX), Las Vegas (VEF), and Hanford (HNX) WFOs. The reports are investigated over the full WY, the cool-season portion of the WY during October–March, and the warm-season portion of the WY during April–September. The NCEI Storm Events Database is used in this study because of its official use in the NOAA community and because it has not yet been used extensively to study the impacts of landfalling ARs. Presentation of spatial statistics of HIHE reports allows double counting across CWAs (e.g., a report on the same day in two different CWAs), whereas presentation of temporal statistics and composite analyses uses unique days with HIHE reports across CWAs (e.g., a HIHE day for Northern CA).

The HIHE days are compared to days with landfalling ARs by using an “AR catalog” produced by Rutz *et al.* [2013]. The AR catalog identifies ARs as locations with IVT magnitudes of $\geq 250 \text{ kg m}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$ that are $\geq 2000 \text{ km}$ in length every 6 h from 1948 to 2015 by using the National Centers for Environmental Prediction (NCEP)–National Center for Atmospheric Research Reanalysis data set on a global 2.5° latitude \times 2.5° longitude resolution grid [Kalnay *et al.*, 1996]. The grid points from the AR catalog used in this study are $40.0^\circ\text{N}, 235.0^\circ\text{E}$; $42.5^\circ\text{N}, 235.0^\circ\text{E}$; $37.5^\circ\text{N}, 237.5^\circ\text{E}$; $35.0^\circ\text{N}, 240.0^\circ\text{E}$; and $32.5^\circ\text{N}, 242.5^\circ\text{E}$ along the California coast. A HIHE day is associated with an AR if an AR is located along the California coast on the day of or the day before the HIHE report. This categorization attempted to correct for a temporal lag among the AR, precipitation, runoff, and the HIHE report.

The common synoptic-scale flow patterns on HIHE days associated with ARs are presented as composite analyses constructed from a combination of reanalysis and operational data from the NCEP–Climate Forecast System Reanalysis (CFSRv2) data set [Saha *et al.*, 2010, 2014]. The CFSRv2 data are contained on a grid that spans vertically from 1000 hPa to 1 hPa on 37 isobaric levels, horizontally with a resolution of ≈ 384 ($\sim 38 \text{ km}$) that is obtained on a 0.5° latitude by 0.5° longitude grid, and temporally every 6 h. All composite analyses are constructed from 1200 UTC data on the day of the HIHE report. All variables shown in composite analyses are provided by NCEP except for the vector quantity IVT, which is calculated according to the methodology of Neiman *et al.* [2008b] as:

$$\vec{IVT} = \frac{1}{g} \int_{1000 \text{ hPa}}^{300 \text{ hPa}} q \vec{V} dp \quad (1)$$

where g is the gravitational acceleration, q is specific humidity, and V is total horizontal vector wind.

The NCEP Stage-IV 24 h quantitative precipitation estimate (QPE) data set is used to investigate CWA areal-averaged precipitation on HIHE days associated with ARs and not associated with ARs. The QPE data set produced by regional River Forecast Centers in the continental United States is constructed from combinations of regional radar and gauge precipitation estimates, known as multisensory precipitation analyses. The regional data sets combine to create a national mosaic of 24 h QPE on a 4 km grid [NCEP/Environmental Modeling Center, 2016]. This study (1) averages the QPE over each California CWA for the 48 h period on the day of and day before a HIHE report in order to identify whether or not mean areal QPE on HIHE days associated with ARs

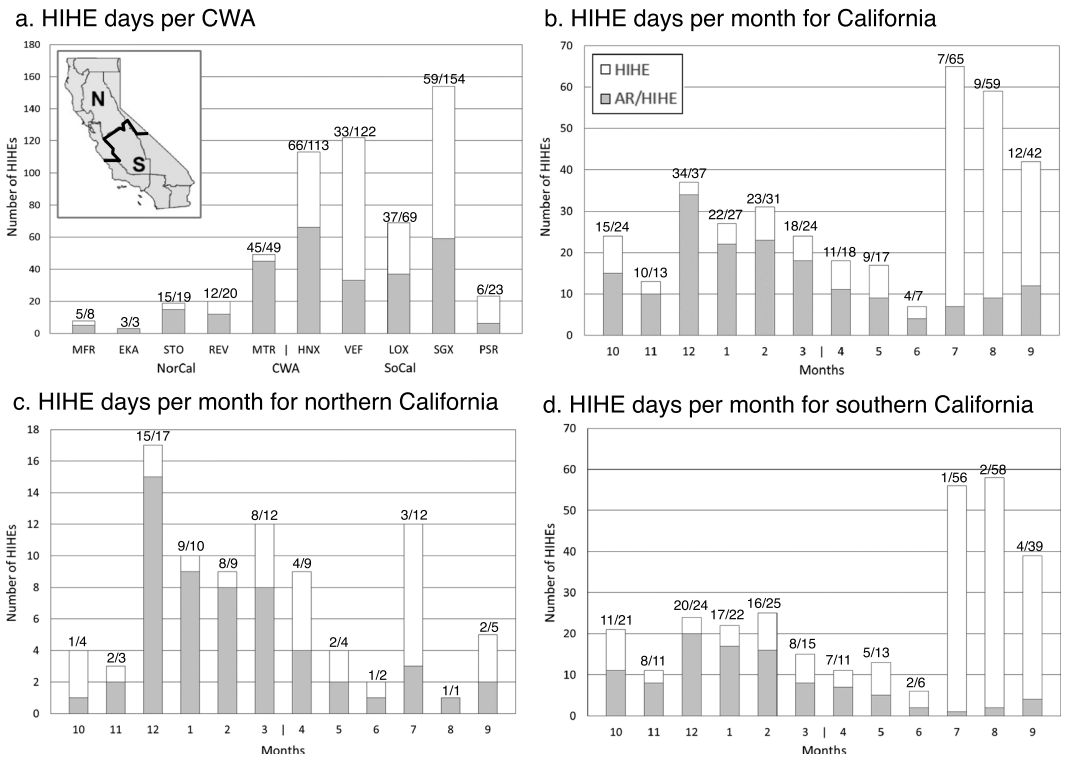


Figure 1. Total number of HIHE days per (a) CWA and month for (b) all of California, (c) Northern California, and (d) Southern California. The white bars and denominator represent the total number of HIHE days, whereas the grey bars and numerator represent the total number of HIHE days associated with ARs.

differs from mean areal QPE on HIHE days not associated with ARs and (2) compares these QPE values to the 10 WY climatology of mean areal QPE on days with >0 mm of precipitation. The former is compared to the latter as its “rank” in the climatology (i.e., a QPE in the 95th percentile is higher than 95% of the days with >0 mm). These statistics were only calculated for CWAs that contained more than one HIHE report.

4. Results

4.1. HIHE Distributions

A total of 1415 HIHE reports in California during the 10 year period of study reduced to 580 HIHE days across the different CWAs (Figure 1a); many days contained more than one report. A large majority (82.9%) of HIHE days occurred over Southern California; however, a larger fraction of HIHEs were associated with landfalling ARs across Northern California (80.8%) as compared to Southern California (41.8%). The 580 HIHE days across the different CWAs, when combined, reduced to 364 unique HIHE days for the state of California (Figure 1b). A larger number of HIHE days statewide occurred during the warm season (57.1%) as compared to the cold season (42.9%). Conversely, a larger fraction of HIHE days associated with ARs occurred in the cold season (78.2%) as compared to the warm season (25.0%), which corresponded to similar values obtained by *Neiman et al. [2008b]* and *Ralph and Dettinger [2012]*. The 580 HIHE days across different CWAs, when combined by region, reduced to 88 unique HIHE days for Northern California and 301 unique HIHE days for Southern California (Figures 1c and 1d). Note that the sum is higher than 364 because some HIHE days contained reports in both Northern California and Southern California. A larger number of HIHE days across Northern California occurred during the cold season (62.5%) as compared to the warm season (37.5%), whereas a larger number of HIHE days across Southern California occurred during the warm season (60.8%) as compared to the cold season (39.2%). The fraction of these HIHE days that are associated with ARs was higher over Northern California (63.6%) as compared to Southern California (39.2%).

The 1415 HIHE reports over California were composed of 395 flood reports, 895 flash flood reports, and 125 debris flow reports that occurred on 126 unique flood days, 260 unique flash flood days, and 84 unique debris

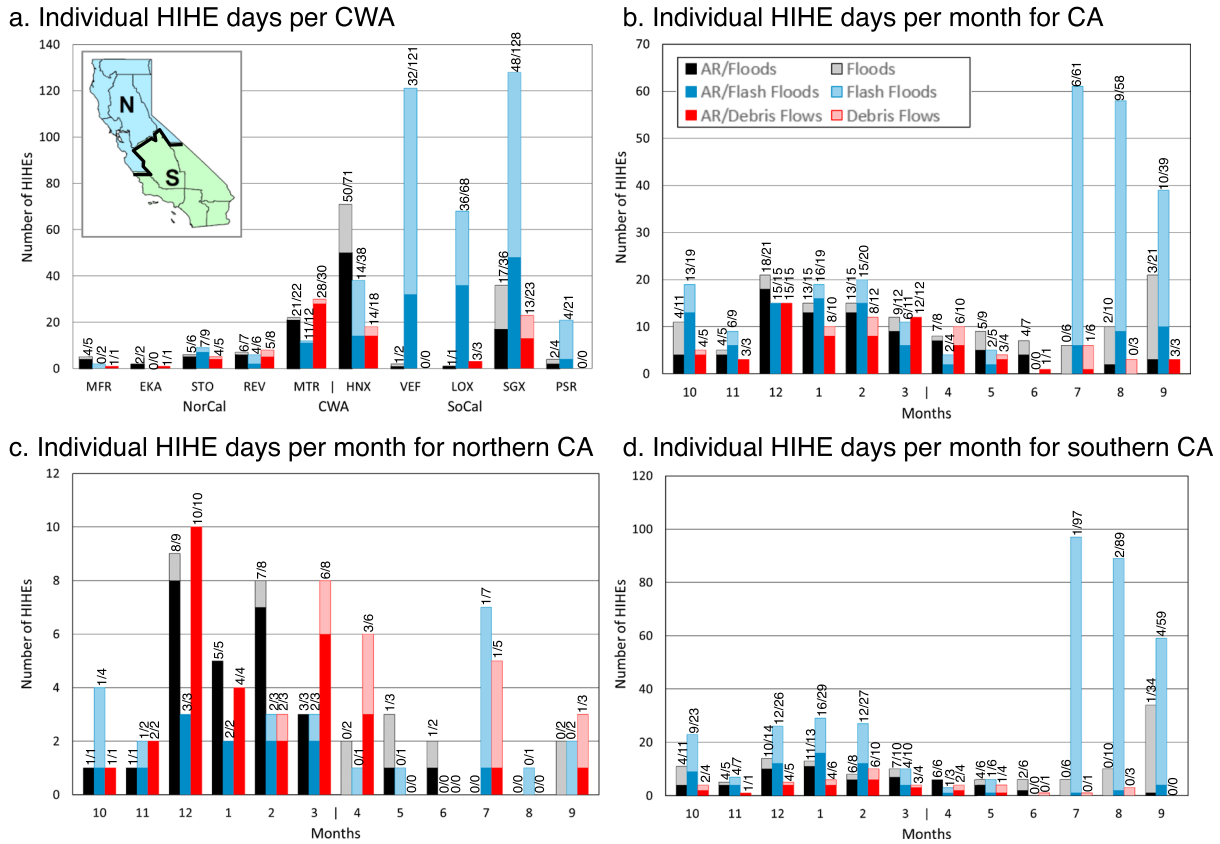


Figure 2. As in Figure 1 except for individual HIHE reports according to the key in Figure 2b.

flow days (Figure 2). A large majority of HIHE days that were associated with flash floods (Figure 2a) were not associated with ARs and occurred during the warm season (Figure 2b) over Southern California (e.g., see Figure 2 and related text from *Ralph et al.* [2014]). Flood and debris flow days comprised a large majority of HIHE days during the cold season at all locations, with the highest fraction of each associated with ARs over Northern California.

4.2. HIHE Composite Analyses

Composite analysis of sea level pressure (SLP), IWV, and IVT on flood, flash flood, and debris flow days across California associated with ARs (Figures 3a, 3c, and 3e) and not associated with ARs (Figures 3b, 3d, and 3f) illustrated respectively similar synoptic-scale patterns over the northeast Pacific. The HIHE days associated with ARs featured a 1004-to-1008 hPa low-pressure system over the Gulf of Alaska and an ~1016-to-1020 hPa high-pressure system over a broad region of the subtropical northeast Pacific that resulted in a general westerly geostrophic flow toward the California coast. This westerly flow contained corridors of weak IWV values of ~20 mm and west-southwest IVT magnitudes of ~250 kg m⁻¹ s⁻¹. Alternatively, the HIHE days not associated with ARs featured a weak region of ~1012 hPa low pressure located over the Alaskan Panhandle, a broad ~1020 hPa anticyclone located over the midlatitude northeast Pacific, and a weak inverted trough located over central California and western North America containing enhanced IWV of >30 mm. This synoptic-scale pattern mimics a warm-season flow pattern across Southern California and closely resembled the type-IV monsoon synoptic pattern as defined by *Maddox et al.* [1980].

Composite analyses of SLP, IWV, and IVT as in Figure 3 partitioned for HIHE days associated with ARs across Northern California and Southern California (Figure 4) removed composite smear in conjunction with averaging landfalling ARs at many different locations along the >1300 km California coastline. These composite analyses illustrated that HIHE days associated with landfalling ARs were generally related to more characteristic IWV values >22.5–25.0 mm and IVT magnitudes that approach 500 kg m⁻¹ s⁻¹. On average, the HIHE

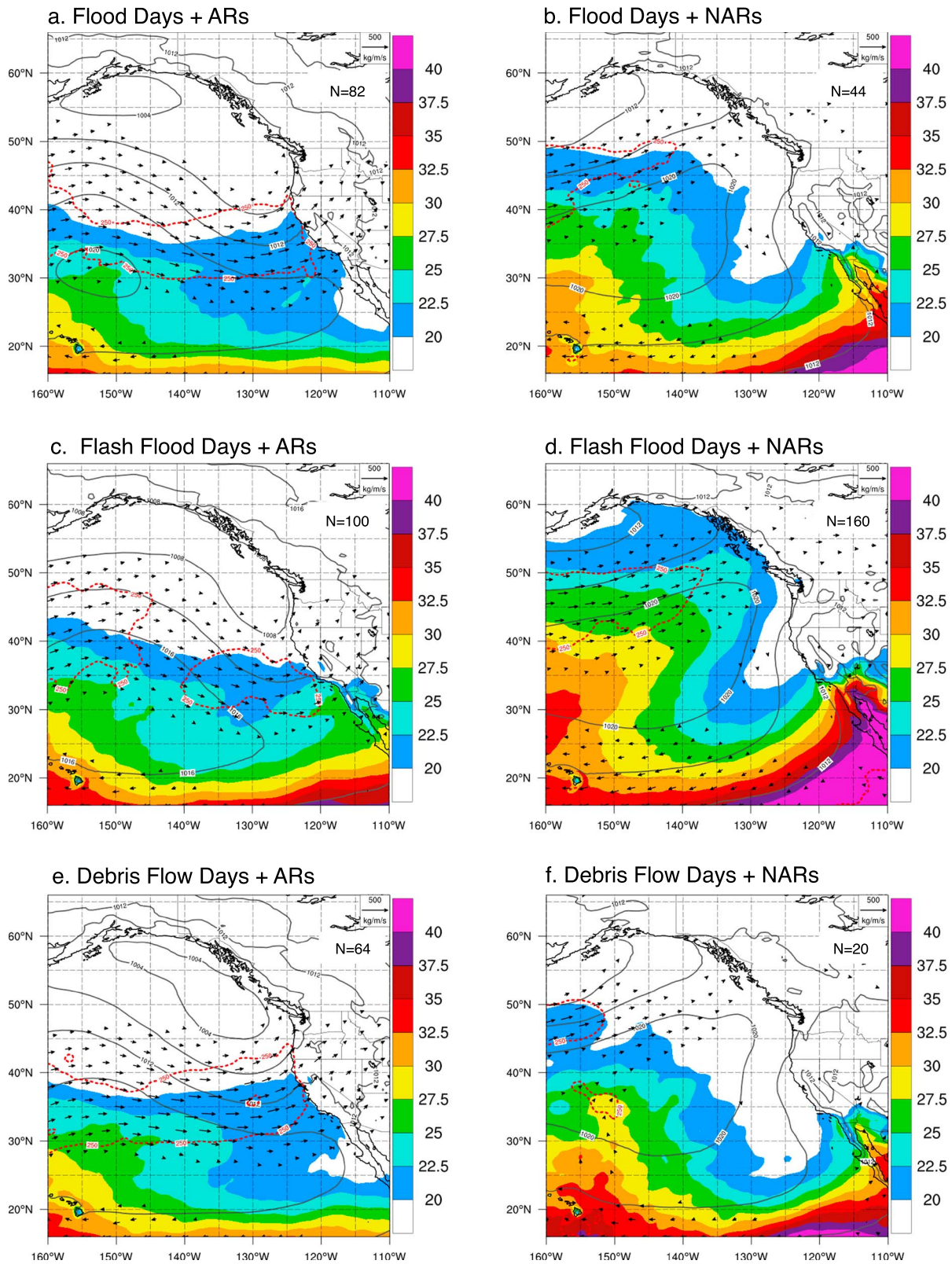


Figure 3. Composite analysis sea level pressure (hPa; contoured), IWV (mm; shaded according to scale), and IVT ($\text{kg m}^{-1} \text{s}^{-1}$; vectors plotted according to reference and for magnitudes of $>100 \text{ kg m}^{-1} \text{s}^{-1}$, and magnitude contoured in red dashed lines every $100 \text{ kg m}^{-1} \text{s}^{-1}$ beginning at $250 \text{ kg m}^{-1} \text{s}^{-1}$) on (a) flood days associated with ARs and (b) flood days not associated with ARs across California. (c–f) as in Figures 3a and 3b, except for flash flood and debris flow days. The number of composite members is indicated in each panel.

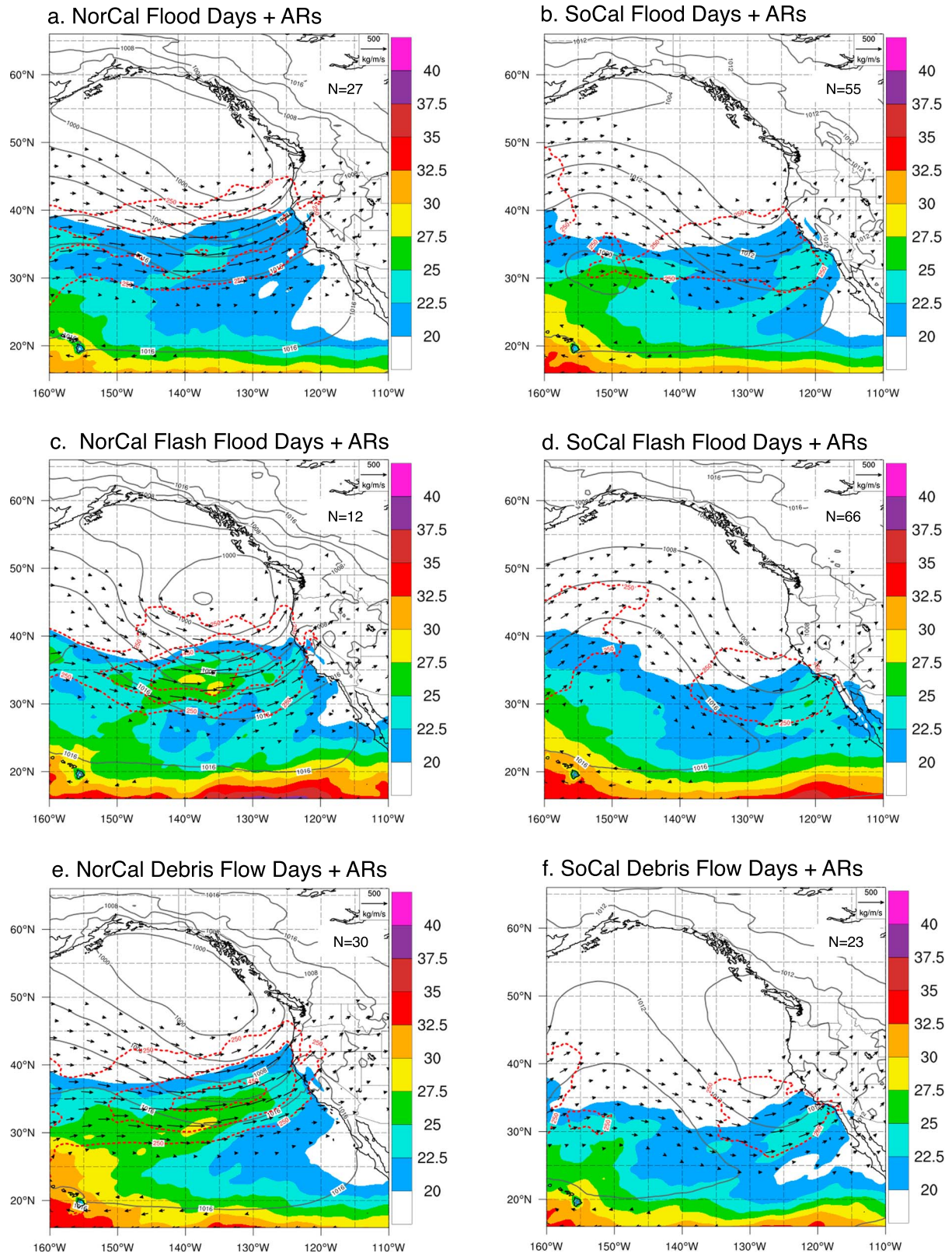


Figure 4. As in Figure 3 except for flood, flash flood, and debris flow days only associated with ARs in (a, c, and e) Northern California and (b, d, and f) Southern California.

| Avg Precip Rank | | MFR | EKA | STO | REV | MTR | HNX | VEF | LOX | SGX | PSR |
|-----------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Floods | AR | 99 | 94 | 96 | 98 | 97 | 95 | 100 | 98 | 97 | 84 |
| | NAR | 92 | - | 54 | 0 | 91 | 73 | 68 | - | 71 | 90 |
| Flash Floods | AR | - | - | 92 | 36 | 99 | 91 | 94 | 96 | 96 | 75 |
| | NAR | 58 | - | 25 | 42 | 58 | 37 | 76 | 71 | 67 | 82 |
| Debris Flows | AR | 97 | 100 | 67 | 98 | 94 | 92 | - | 99 | 96 | - |
| | NAR | - | - | 0 | 58 | 56 | 36 | - | - | 88 | - |

Figure 5. Mean areal QPE rank with respect to a 10 WY climatology for CWA 48 h mean areal QPE on the day of and day before HIHE associated with ARs (AR) and not associated with ARs (NAR) by HIHE type: flood days (grey), flash flood days (blue), and debris flow days (pink). The red text denotes that HIHE days associated with ARs contained a higher rank than HIHE days not associated with ARs.

days associated with ARs across Northern California occurred in conjunction with IVT magnitudes that were $150\text{--}200 \text{ kg m}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$ higher and IWV values that are $\sim 2.5\text{--}5.0 \text{ mm}$ lower than those across Southern California. This dichotomy suggests that landfalling ARs that produce HIHEs across Northern California generally contain stronger wind speeds, which can be inferred from the magnitude of the composite SLP gradient, whereas landfalling ARs that produce HIHEs across Southern California generally contain higher amounts of water vapor. The composite analyses also illustrated that HIHE days associated with ARs across Northern and Southern California occurred in conjunction with west-southwest oriented IVT (i.e., ARs). This AR orientation compares favorably with the orientations of the California Coast Ranges and the Transverse Mountain Ranges (not shown), respectively, which can influence the intensity of orographic precipitation [Ralph et al., 2006].

The CWA 48 h mean areal QPE rank for HIHE days associated with ARs and not associated with ARs is presented in Figure 5. HIHE days associated with ARs generally contained a higher QPE rank than HIHE days not associated with ARs with a few exceptions (e.g., flood days at PSR and flash flood days at REV and PSR). The HIHE days associated with ARs generally contained QPE values that ranked in the top 5% (>95th percentile) of all 48 h periods with >0 mm precipitation during the 10 WY study, whereas the HIHE days not associated with ARs generally contained QPE values that ranked in the middle 50% of the QPE distribution.

4.3. Precipitation Analyses

The CWA 48 h mean areal QPE rank for HIHE days associated with ARs and not associated with ARs is presented in Figure 5. HIHE days associated with ARs generally contained a higher QPE rank than HIHE days not associated with ARs with a few exceptions (e.g., flood days at PSR and flash flood days at REV and PSR). The HIHE days associated with ARs generally contained QPE values that ranked in the top 5% (>95th percentile) of all 48 h periods with >0 mm precipitation during the 10 WY study, whereas the HIHE days not associated with ARs generally contained QPE values that ranked in the middle 50% of the QPE distribution.

5. Concluding Discussion

A majority of extreme precipitation events in California are associated with landfalling ARs that may produce floods, flash floods, and debris flows (i.e., high-impact hydrological events (HIHEs)). This study identified a 10 WY climatology of HIHEs over California from the NCEI Storm Events Database and subsequently illustrated the synoptic-scale flow patterns on HIHE days associated with ARs. The 10 WY period contained 1415 HIHE reports over California that occurred on 364 unique days. A large majority of these HIHE days occurred during the warm season over Southern California in conjunction with flash floods, whereas a large majority of HIHE days associated with ARs occurred during the cold season over Northern California in association with floods and debris flows.

Composite analyses of SLP, IWV, and IVT on HIHE days illustrated that HIHEs occurred in association with a region of lower SLP of varying strength located over the Gulf of Alaska and a region of higher SLP of varying strength located over the Central North Pacific that resulted in westerly geostrophic flow. This westerly flow contained enhanced IWV values of >20 mm and IVT magnitudes of >250 $\text{kg m}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$. When the composite analyses for HIHE days associated with ARs were bifurcated into locations across Northern California and Southern California, IWV values and IVT magnitudes increased to >22.5–25 mm and >500 $\text{kg m}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$, respectively, along a corridor that palpably resembled a landfalling AR. The unique composite analysis illustrated that flash flood days across Southern California tended to occur on days with synoptic-scale flow patterns that resembled the warm-season North American monsoon. The composite analyses for HIHE days associated with ARs also highlighted that landfalling ARs across Northern and Southern California contained west-southwest oriented IVT. This IVT direction was generally perpendicular to the Coastal Ranges and Transverse Ranges, which can maximize upslope water vapor flux and orographic precipitation.

An analysis of 48 h mean areal QPE illustrated that HIHE days associated with ARs occurred in conjunction with QPE in the top 5% of its distribution, whereas those not associated with ARs occurred in conjunction with QPE in the middle 50% of its distribution with few exceptions. Although this analysis does not necessarily identify the characteristics that define whether or not an AR will produce extreme precipitation or a HIHE, it does provide insight into the likely processes associated with ARs that lead to extreme precipitation and HIHEs. For example, for constant geomorphic conditions (e.g., slope, land cover, and soil moisture), a HIHE may be more likely associated with a landfalling AR owing to stationary precipitation forced by topography and relatively long duration that produces top 5% 48 h mean areal QPE amounts that can saturate soils and lead to enhanced run off and streamflow. Alternatively, a HIHE that is not associated with an AR under similar conditions may be more likely in conjunction with more localized higher precipitation intensity and shorter durations that produce much lower 48 h mean areal QPE amounts. These results motivate future work that could investigate localized 1, 3, and 6 h precipitation rates [Stock and Bellugi, 2011; Collins *et al.*, 2012; among others] and their mesoscale and synoptic-scale precipitation processes that can better illustrate this spectrum of precipitation rate and durations that leads to HIHEs.

This study illustrated that HIHE days contained within the NCEI Storm Events Database for CWAs across California can be attributed to landfalling ARs and their associated precipitation extremes. This attribution is largely valid for HIHE days across Northern California in the cold season and not necessarily valid for HIHE days across Southern California during the warm season. Approximately 57% of all HIHE days in California occurred during the warm season, mostly in conjunction with flash floods, and 75% of these HIHE days were not associated with ARs. The composite analysis of flash flood days across California illustrated the climatological warm-season flow pattern for precipitation across Southern California and closely resembled the type-IV monsoon synoptic pattern as defined by Maddox *et al.* [1980]. This result motivates additional future work that could focus on the role of the North American monsoon and other non-AR processes that produce HIHEs across California.

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