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Technical Note: Initial assessment of a multi-method approach to spring-flood forecasting in Sweden

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Abstract. Hydropower is a major energy source in Sweden, and proper reservoir management prior to the spring-flood onset is crucial for optimal production. This requires accurate forecasts of the accumulated discharge in the spring-flood period (i.e. the spring-flood volume, SFV). Today's SFV forecasts are generated using a model-based climatological ensemble approach, where time series of precipitation and temperature from historical years are used to force a calibrated and initialized set-up of the HBV model. In this study, a number of new approaches to spring-flood forecasting that reflect the latest developments with respect to analysis and modelling on seasonal timescales are presented and evaluated. Three main approaches, represented by specific methods, are evaluated in SFV hindcasts for the Swedish river Vindelälven over a 10-year period with lead times between 0 and 4 months. In the first approach, historically analogue years with respect to the climate in the period preceding the spring flood are identified and used to compose a reduced ensemble. In the second, seasonal meteorological ensemble forecasts are used to drive the HBV model over the spring-flood period. In the third approach, statistical relationships between SFV and the large-sale atmospheric circulation are used to build forecast models. None of the new approaches consistently outperform the climatological ensemble approach, but for early forecasts improvements of up to 25 % are found. This potential is reasonably well realized in a multi-method system, which over all forecast dates reduced the error in SFV by $\sim$4 %. This improvement is limited but potentially significant for e.g. energy trading.

1 Introduction

In Sweden, seasonal (or long-term) hydrological forecasts are used primarily by the hydropower industry for dam regulation and production planning (e.g. Arheimer et al., 2011). The forecasts may be used to optimize the balance between a sufficiently large water volume for optimal power production and a sufficient remaining capacity to safely handle sudden inflows. In northern Sweden, the spring-flood forecast is the most important seasonal hydrological forecast and it generally covers the main snowmelt period in May, June and July.

Traditionally, discharge and spring-flood forecasting at seasonal timescales have been based on two approaches. The first utilizes statistical relationships between accumulated discharge during the forecasting period and predictors such as snow water equivalent and accumulated precipitation that represent the hydrological state at the forecast date (e.g. Garen, 1992; Pagano et al., 2009). The other approach is based on a hydrological model, which is initialized with observed data up to the forecast issue date and then forced with historical meteorological inputs over the forecasting period (e.g. Day, 1985; Franz et al., 2003). In addition, hybrid approaches, applying model-derived information in the statistical regression, have been proposed (e.g. Nilsson et al., 2006; Rosenberg et al., 2011).

Recently, substantial progress has been made in the field of seasonal climate forecasting. It may be distinguished between dynamical and statistical approaches. In the dynamical approach, numerical atmospheric models (global circulation models – GCMs) have been developed to predict seasonal climate, i.e. the average climate for three consecutive months, several months ahead (Goddard et al., 2001). The scientific basis of such predictions is that the sea surface temperature (SST), which characteristically evolves slowly, drives the predictable part of the climate. Consequently, providing to a GCM the information about the variations in SST makes possible the forecast of seasonal climate. The SST information may be provided to the GCM by using the SST field as a boundary condition or by coupling the GCM to an ocean model that will then provide the necessary SST information. GCM seasonal forecasts may be downscaled dynamically (e.g. Graham et al., 2007; Bastola et al. 2013; Bastola and Misra, 2014) or statistically (e.g. Uvo and Graham, 1998; Landman et al., 2001; Nilsson et al., 2008), to better represent regional interests.

An early attempt to use climate model output for hydrological forecasting in a coastal Californian basin during winter 1997/1998 was made by Kim et al. (2000). They found an overall decent agreement between simulated and observed discharge. Low (high) flows were however systematically overestimated (underestimated), which was attributed primarily to climate model precipitation bias. To tackle this problem of climate model biases, Wood et al. (2002) proposed bias correction by a percentile-based mapping of the climate model output to the climatological distributions of the input variables. Recently, several investigations have focused on the relative role of uncertainties in the initial state and in the climate forecast, respectively, for the hydrological forecast skill (e.g. Li et al., 2009; Shukla and Lettenmaier, 2011).

In a climate-based statistical approach, connections between climate phenomena that affect the large-scale atmospheric circulation and the subsequent hydro-meteorological development in specific locations are identified and utilized (e.g. Jónsdótir and Uvo, 2009). Such connections are known as teleconnections as they link phenomena occurring in widely separated regions of the world. The impacts of the El Niño–Southern Oscillation on the tropical climate are the most commonly used of such teleconnections in seasonal forecast (Troccoli, 2010). Teleconnections can be also the basis for seasonal forecast in high latitudes such as the impacts of the North Atlantic Oscillation in the winter climate in Scandinavia (e.g. Uvo, 2003) and the more recently identified impacts of the Scandinavian pattern on summer climate in southern Sweden (Engström, 2011; Foster and Uvo, 2012). Teleconnection indices have also been used as predictors in regression-based approaches to seasonal hydrological forecasting (e.g. Robertson and Wang, 2012).

In light of the above-described progress of the field, it is time to explore ways of updating operational practices by incorporating the new knowledge acquired and methods developed. The objective of this study has been to develop, test and evaluate new approaches to spring-flood forecasting in Sweden. The current spring-flood forecasting practice at the Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute (SMHI) is an example of the traditional model-based approach. It is a climatological ensemble approach based on the HBV hydrological model (e.g. Bergström, 1976; Lindström et al., 1997). The main scientific hypothesis examined is that the application of large-scale climate data (historical and forecasted) can improve forecast skill, as compared with today's procedure. A secondary hypothesis is that a combination of approaches provides an added value, as compared with each individual approach. Three different approaches have been tested and evaluated: (1) identification of analogue historical years that resemble the weather in the current year, (2) use of meteorological seasonal forecasts as input to the HBV model and (3) application of statistical relationships between large-scale circulation variables and spring-flood volume. The new approaches were evaluated for the spring-flood forecasts 2000–2010 issued in January, March and May for the river Vindelälven in Sweden.

2 Material

2.1 Study area, local data and models

The catchment of the river Vindelälven has been used for testing spring-flood forecast. Vindelälven is unregulated and two stations were selected for evaluation of the forecast methods: Sorsele located in the upstream part of the basin and Vindeln at basin outlet (Fig. 1a). The catchment's elevation range is ~ 260–840 m a.s.l. and ~ 5 % of the area consists of lakes. The annual mean temperature is -0.7 °C and precipitation ~ 780 mm. Figure 2a shows the mean annual hydrograph for station Vindeln (1981–2010), which is the period of interest in this study. In January–February the temperature is generally below -10 °C and very little runoff is generated. Melting generally starts in late April, and the subsequent spring flood extends throughout July, followed by elevated discharge levels also in August–October.

In this study we focus on forecasts of the *accumulated discharge in the spring-flood period* (May–July), which is the key variable delivered to the hydropower industry. This quantity will in the following be referred to as SFV (spring-flood volume). The mean SFV at station Vindeln (Table 1), corresponds to an average discharge in the spring-flood period of $\sim 380\,\mathrm{m^3\,s^{-1}}$. SFV has a pronounced inter-annual variability, which is illustrated by its range (Table 1) and frequency distribution (Fig. 2b).

The HBV model (Bergström, 1976; Lindström et al., 1997) was set up and calibrated for Vindelälven, divided into 18 subcatchments with a mean size of 740 $\mathrm{km^2}$. HBV is a rainfall-runoff model which includes conceptual numerical descriptions of hydrological processes at basin scale. The general water balance in the HBV model can be expressed as

$$P - E - R = \frac{\mathrm{d}}{\mathrm{d}t}[\mathrm{SP} + \mathrm{SM} + \mathrm{UZ} + \mathrm{LZ} + \mathrm{VL}], \qquad (1)$$

where P denotes precipitation, E evapotranspiration, R runoff, SP snow pack, SM soil moisture, UZ and LZ up-

Table 1. Basin and station characteristics including overall performance of the HBV model. MARE (%) of SFV estimated by simulation (SIM) and by climatological ensemble (CE) forecasts (F) with different issue dates (1/1, 1/3, 1/5). All values represent 2000–2010.

Station	Area	HBV		SFV ($m^3 \times 10^9$)	$MARE_{SIM}$	$MARE_{CE}$		
	(km^2)	NSE	RVE	Min/Mean/Max		F 1/1	F 1/3	F 1/5
Sorsele	6054	0.89	3.2	1.61/2.30/2.77	6.8	19.2	11.6	9.5
Vindeln*	11 846	0.91	1.5	2.26/3.18/4.11	8.2	20.0	13.2	9.0

* Basin outlet

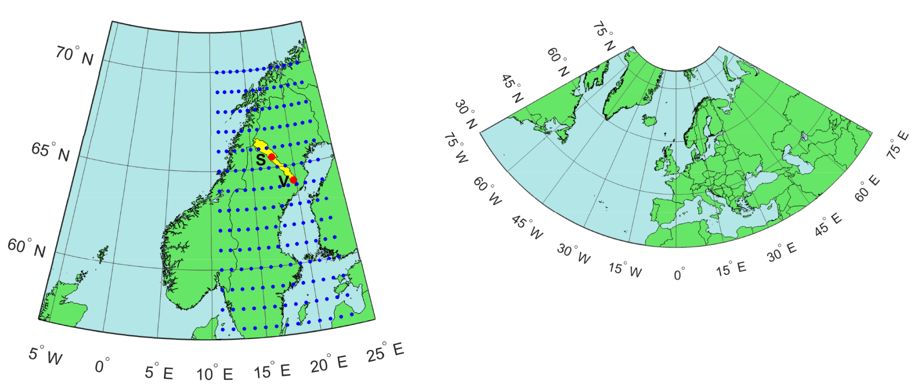

Figure 1. Domain used in the CP method, ECMWF IFS grid (blue dots), Vindelälven catchment (yellow), stations Sorsele (S) and Vindeln (V) **(a)**. Domain used in the SD method **(b)**.

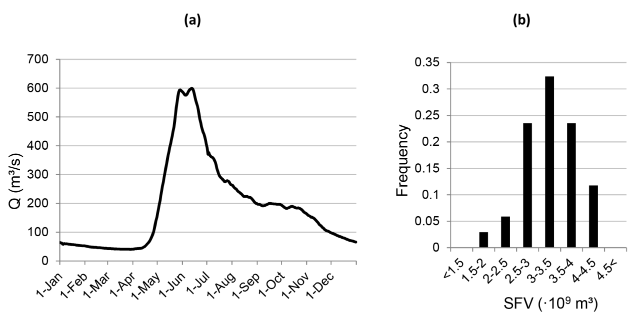

Figure 2. Mean annual Q cycle **(a)** and SFV frequency distribution **(b)** for station Vindeln in the period 1961–1999.

per and lower groundwater, respectively, and VL the volume of lakes. Input data are normally daily observations of P, air temperature T and monthly estimates of potential evapotranspiration; output is daily Q. Temperature data are used for calculations of snow accumulation and melt and possibly potential evaporation. The model consists of subroutines for meteorological interpolation, snow accumulation and melt, evapotranspiration estimation, a soil moisture accounting procedure, routines for runoff generation and, finally, a simple routing procedure between subbasins and lakes. Applying the model necessitates calibration of a number of free parameters, generally about 10.

For historical simulation and calibration, daily P and T inputs for the Vindelälven basin were aggregated to basin scale from gridded fields ($4 \times 4\,km^2$), created by optimal interpolation with altitude and wind taken into account (e.g. Johansson, 2002). These data, as well as Q observations, are available from 1961. The HBV set-up used in this experiment is the continuously updated and re-calibrated version used operationally, conceivably representing the optimal performance currently attainable. The calibration is mainly based on the historical period prior to the evaluation period (1961–1999), but some re-calibration has been done also later.

The overall accuracy of the HBV calibration expressed in terms of the Nash–Sutcliffe efficiency (NSE) and the relative volume error (RVE) in period October 1999–September 2010 are given in Table 1. Values of NSE $\sim$ 0.9 and only a few percent volume error imply an accurately calibrated model with limited scope for improvement.

2.2 Large-scale atmospheric data

For the definition of circulation patterns (Sect. 3.1), the ERA40 data set (Uppala et al., 2005), with resolution of $1° \times 1°$, was used during 1961–2002 while ERA-INTERIM (Dee et al., 2011), with a $0.75° \times 0.75°$ resolution, was used during 2003–2010. The domain is shown in Fig. 1a. For the teleconnection-based method studies (Sect. 3.1), monthly indices of the North Atlantic Oscillation, Scandinavian pattern and east Atlantic pattern were collected from the Climate Prediction Center (Climate Prediction Center, 2015).

The atmospheric seasonal forecast data used in this work were obtained from the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF). Two model combinations were available: the ECMWF IFS (Integrated Forecast System, version 3) coupled with a 1° version of the HOPE ocean model and the ARPEGE atmospheric model coupled with the variable-resolution (0.33–2°) ORCA ocean model. Atmospheric seasonal forecasts were used in two different forms: seasonal averages from both IFS and Arpege were used in the statistical downscaling Sect. 3.1), and daily time series from IFS were used in the dynamical modelling (Sect. 3.1).

- Seasonal averages: these data are the ensemble means of the different predicted fields covering the domain 75° W to 75° E and 80 to 20° N with a $2° \times 2°$ resolution. The predicted fields considered were 2 m T, 10 m meridional wind velocity, meridional wind stress, 10 m zonal wind velocity, zonal wind stress, surface sensible heat flux, surface latent heat flux, total precipitation, 850 hPa T, 850 hPa specific humidity, 850 hPa meridional wind velocity, 850 hPa zonal wind velocity and 850 hPa geopotential height. The number of ensemble members per field is 11 for the period 1982–2006 (IFS) or 1982–2007 (Arpege) and 41 for the remaining years until 2010. The domain is shown in Fig. 1a.

- Daily time series: these data are the forecasted daily values of 2 m T and the accumulated total P from the forecast issue date to the forecasting period. These data spanned a period from 2000 to 2010 and had a domain covering 11 to 23° E and 55 to 70° N with a $1° \times 1°$ resolution. Figure 1a shows this $1° \times 1°$ grid in relation to Sweden.

3 Experimental set-up

Three new approaches to seasonal hydrological forecasting are presented and compared to the current climatological ensemble procedure currently applied at SMHI: analogue ensemble, dynamical modelling and statistical downscaling. All methods are described in detail in the Supplement; below only brief outlines are given.

Figure 3 shows a schematic of the “temporal set-up” of the experiments. A key issue in seasonal forecasting is the lead time (green area in Fig. 3), i.e. the period between the forecast issue date and the start of the forecasting period (blue area). It may be expected that the relative skill of the different approaches depends on the lead time. Generally, the main gain of statistical approaches is expected for long lead times. When approaching the forecasting period, the representation of the hydro-meteorological state in the HBV model becomes gradually more important, and the relative skill of the current procedure is likely to increase. To assess the relative

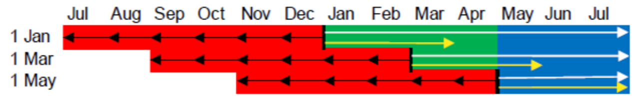

Figure 3. Temporal set-up of the experiments. Vertical black lines: forecast dates. Blue area: spring-flood period. Green area: lead time. Red area: full historical period used in the selection of analogue years (CP, TCI). Black arrows: time periods (1–6 months back in time) tested in the selection of analogue years (CP, TCI). Yellow arrows: time period (3 months ahead) used to calculate the predictors in the SD method. White arrows: forecasting periods in which the HBV model was run using full historical ensemble (CE), reduced analogue ensemble (CP, TCI) and ECMWF forecasts (DM).

skill for different lead times, we evaluate historical forecasts (re-forecasts) issued on 1 January (1/1), 1 March (1/3) and 1 May (1/5) in the period 2000–2010.

3.1 Methods

- Climatological ensemble (CE): in this procedure, HBV is initialized by driving it with observed meteorological inputs (P and T) for a spin-up period up to the forecast issue date. Then, all available historical daily P and T series in the period from the forecast issue date to the end of the forecasting period are used as input to HBV, generating an ensemble of spring-flood forecasts. For more details, see Supplement, Sect. S1.

- Analogue ensemble (AE): the hypothesis is that it is possible to identify a reduced set of historical years (an analogue ensemble) that describes the weather in the coming forecasting period better than the full historical ensemble used in CE. Two methods for identifying analogue years are used, both based on analyses of large-scale atmospheric conditions 1–6 months prior to the forecast issue date (Fig. 3): (1) teleconnection indices (TCI) – evolution of indices representing different climate phenomena – and (2) circulation patterns (CPs) – frequencies of weather types that describe the large-scale atmospheric state. The analogue ensemble is then used in the same way as the full ensemble in the CE method. For more details, see Supplement, Sect. S2.

- Dynamical modelling (DM): HBV is initialized as in the CE method. Then T and P from meteorological seasonal forecasts (Sect. 2.2) are converted to HBV input and used to drive the model in the forecasting period. For more details, see Supplement, Sect. S3.

- Statistical downscaling (SD): statistical relationships between forecasted large-scale circulation variables (predictors) and SFV (predictand) are identified. The predictors are defined in the 3-month period following the forecast issue date (Fig. 3). For more details, see Supplement, Sect. S4.

3.2 Evaluation

As described in the Supplement, all methods generate ensemble forecasts (although the AE approach may become deterministic if only one analogue year is found). The ensemble size, however, varies between methods as well as between years for the same method (Supplement, Table S1). Although probabilistic forecasts are generally more useful than deterministic ones, for this initial assessment, with only an 11-year evaluation period, we consider it sufficient with a deterministic evaluation. Thus, from all ensemble forecasts the median forecast is calculated and used in the subsequent analysis, neglecting any impact of ensemble size on the skill of the median (e.g. Buizza and Palmer, 1998).

Forecast performance is assessed by $\mathrm{MARE_F}$, the mean absolute value of the relative error of a certain forecast (or simulation) F, defined as

$$\mathrm{MARE_F} = \frac{1}{11}\sum_{y=2000}^{2010} \mathrm{ARE_F^{\mathit{y}}}, \tag{2}$$

where y denotes year and $\mathrm{ARE_F^{\mathit{y}}}$ the absolute value of the relative error

$$\mathrm{ARE_F^{\mathit{y}}} = \left| 100 \cdot \left(\frac{\mathrm{SFV_F^{\mathit{y}}} - \mathrm{SFV_{OBS}^{\mathit{y}}}}{\mathrm{SFV_{OBS}^{\mathit{y}}}} \right) \right|, \tag{3}$$

where OBS denotes observation.

To quantify the gain of the new forecast approaches (Sects. 3.2–3.4), their MARE values are compared with the MARE obtained using the current CE procedure ($\mathrm{MARE_{CE}}$) by calculating the relative improvement, RI (%), according to

$$\mathrm{RI_F} = 100 \cdot \left(\frac{\mathrm{MARE_{CE}} - \mathrm{MARE_F}}{\mathrm{MARE_{CE}}} \right), \tag{4}$$

where a positive RI indicates that the error of the new approach is smaller than the error in the CE procedure and vice versa, and $\mathrm{RI} = 100\,\%$ implies a perfect forecast.

As an additional performance measure, we use the frequency of years $\mathrm{FY^+}$ (%) in which the new approach performs better (i.e. has a lower ARE) than the CE procedure. This may be expressed as

$$\mathrm{FY_F^+} = 100 \cdot \left(\frac{1}{11} \sum_{y=2000}^{2010} H^y \right), \tag{5}$$

where H is the Heaviside function defined by

$$H^y = \begin{cases} 0, & \mathrm{AE_{CE}^{\mathit{y}}} < \mathrm{AE_F^{\mathit{y}}} \\ 1, & \mathrm{AE_{CE}^{\mathit{y}}} > \mathrm{AE_F^{\mathit{y}}} \end{cases}. \tag{6}$$

As expected considering the short 11-year evaluation period, MARE is sensitive to single years with a high ARE value. As shown in the results below (Sect. 4), in several cases this makes RI negative even if the new approach outperforms CE in most years (i.e. $\mathrm{FY^+} > 50$). Thus, in this study we consider $\mathrm{FY^+}$ to be the most relevant measure of forecast performance, although in practice this should be determined together with end-users of the forecasts, based on e.g. the impacts of very inaccurate forecasts.

3.3 Baseline simulations with climatological ensemble (CE)

Before testing the new forecasting approaches, the performance of HBV model and the climatological ensemble procedure (CE) was assessed (Table 1). In simulation mode, i.e. using the actually observed values of P and T in each year, the MARE of SFV is 7–8 %. This quantifies the HBV model error and corresponds to having a perfect meteorological forecast. In CE forecast mode, i.e. using P and T from all historical years as input and to calculate the median SFV, the average MARE decreases gradually from $\sim 20\,\%$ in the 1/1 forecasts to $\sim 9\,\%$ in the 1/5 forecasts, which thus quantifies the improvement when approaching the spring-flood period.

The differences in Table 1 between MARE for simulations and CE forecasts, respectively, represent the part of the total error that is related to the meteorological input. In Vindelälven, this part decreases from 12.1 percentage points in the 1/1 forecasts (which corresponds to $\sim 60\,\%$ of the total error) to 1.8 points in the 1/5 forecasts ($\sim 20\,\%$). The relative impact of the HBV model error thus increases with decreasing lead time, which implies that the scope for improving the baseline forecasts decreases with decreasing lead time. It should be emphasized that two out of the three new forecast approaches tested here (AE and DM) aim at improving the meteorological input. They can thus only improve the forecasts in that respect; the HBV model error remains. The third method (SD), however, aims at improving total performance.

4 Results from single methods

An overview of the results of each approach is given in Table 2. The numbers after approaches TCI and CP correspond to the best performing version of each approach.

Concerning the AE approach, both the TCI and the CP approach are based on analyses of the large-scale climatic conditions 1 to 6 months before the forecast date (see Supplement). The aim was to identify the number of months of prior climatic information, N, that generates the best performance when averaged over all forecast dates. Using TCI to identify analogue years proved to be difficult, and the reduced ensemble generated did generally not outperform CE for the SFV forecasts. Even the best performing TCI version, using 6 months' prior climate information ($N = 6$; TCI6), consistently had a higher MARE than CE although it outperformed CE for most of the 11 years in station Sorsele (Table 2). For

Table 2. Relative improvement RI (%) and frequency of years with a better performance FY^+ (%) of the new forecasting approaches TCI6, CP3, DM and SD, as compared with the climatological ensemble CE (boldface indicates better performance than CE).

		TCI6		CP3		DM		SD	
		RI	FY^+	RI	FY^+	RI	FY^+	RI	FY^+
1/1	Sorsele	−6.6	**55**	**1.4**	**75**	**7.6**	45	**18.4**	**55**
	Vindeln	−9.0	45	**13.0**	**75**	**–13.5**	45	**17.3**	**55**
1/3	Sorsele	−1.2	**64**	**19.2**	**70**	−17.3	45	−63.3	**55**
	Vindeln	−10.4	45	**36.2**	**80**	−18.5	45	−29.4	45
1/5	Sorsele	−6.6	**55**	−9.9	33	**1.3**	**55**	−66.8	**64**
	Vindeln	−21.9	45	−31.3	33	−12.0	36	−90.3	27
Average		−9.3	**52**	**4.8**	**61**	−8.7	45	−35.7	50

the 1/1 forecasts, $N = 6$ was clearly superior but for the later forecasts $N = 1$ and $N = 2$ produced a similar performance.

The CP method turned out to be more successful, and the resulting SFV forecasts on 1/1 and 1/3 for the best performing version ($N = 3$; CP3) clearly outperformed CE in both stations (Table 2). SFV was more accurately forecasted than with CE in 3/4 of all years. For the 1/5 forecasts, however, CP was less accurate than CE. For the 1/1 and 1/3 forecasts, $N = 3$ was clearly superior, but for the 1/5 forecasts $N = 2$ and $N = 4$ performed slightly better.

Overall, the DM approach of using ECMWF seasonal forecasts of T and P as inputs to the HBV model did not improve performance as compared with the CE procedure (Table 2). In total, a similar performance to CE was found in station Sorsele, but the accuracy in station Vindeln was consistently lower. In the 1/5 forecasts, however, DM is the overall best performing new approach.

The SD method outperformed CE in the 1/1 forecasts with an RI of almost 20 % in both stations (Table 2). For the 1/3 and 1/5 forecasts the SD method has FY^+ values > 50 in station Sorsele but RI values of ~ -65 %. This implies that the SD forecast is generally better than CE but that it may also be very wrong.

The performance of the SD method is heavily affected by whether the climatic features in the forecasting data were encountered in the training period data set. If the forecasted conditions are outside the range encountered in the training period, the SD method has the tendency to produce forecasts that differ drastically from the observations. This can be dealt with either by increasing the length of the training data set or by analysing the year in question and determining if there were similar years in the training period which would give an indication as to how the method might perform.

With very few exceptions, the new approaches performed better in the upper part of the catchment (Sorsele) than in the outlet (Vindeln). This has not been analysed in any depth, but it is likely related to the more clear-cut spring flood in the upper part with very little prior runoff. In the outlet, melting episodes before the spring-flood onset lead to temporary increased runoff and a reduction of the snow pack. These episodes, and their impacts, are likely very difficult to capture in seasonal forecasts.

5 Composing a multi-method system

A multi-method forecast approach consists in combining forecasts resulting from different methods to reach a more reliable estimate of the forecast probability distribution. This technique has been used since early 1990s for developing seasonal climate forecast (Tracton and Kalnay, 1993) and has proved to provide more skilful results than a simple model forecast (Hagedorn et al., 2005; among many others).

There are many possible ways of combining or merging multi-method forecasts, ranging from simple rank-based methods to more sophisticated statistical concepts. In light of the limited material available in this study, we restricted ourselves to testing two conceptually straightforward ways of combining the forecasts: a median approach (Sect. 5.1) and a weighted approach (Sect. 5.2). Further, the value of using transparent and easily communicated approaches should not be underestimated when the target is operational forecasting and its associated end-user interaction.

In each approach, two method ensembles are tested. The first ensemble, denoted NEW, represents the new approaches to spring-flood forecasting considered in the study and thus includes approaches AE, DM and SD. As only one approach to analogue ensemble generation should be included, the best performing one for each forecast date was used, i.e. CP for 1/1 and 1/3 and TCI for 1/5 (Table 2). The CP method is, however, not directly applicable in operational forecasting as it is based on ERA reanalyses that are only available with a time lag of several months. Further, the TCI approach does not outperform CE in the 1/5 forecasts. Therefore we also consider a second ensemble that represents what is attainable operationally. In this ensemble, denoted OPE, AE

Table 3. Relative improvement RI (%) and frequency of years with a better performance FY^+ (%) for the median and weighted multi-method approaches, as compared with the climatological ensemble CE (boldface indicates better performance than CE).

		Median				Weighted			
		NEW		OPE		NEW		OPE	
		RI	FY^+	RI	FY^+	RI	FY^+	RI	FY^+
1/1	Sorsele	**20.9**	50	**25.3**	**56**	**20.1**	**55**	**18.2**	**64**
	Vindeln	**5.8**	50	**12.5**	**56**	**15.7**	**64**	**12.9**	**64**
1/3	Sorsele	**5.9**	**60**	−4.2	**56**	**13.3**	**64**	−7.2	**55**
	Vindeln	−0.1	**60**	−10.7	43	**3.8**	**55**	−10	**55**
1/5	Sorsele	**3.7**	**55**	**7.9**	**67**	−5.0	**55**	−0.6	**55**
	Vindeln	−15.6	36	−5.2	33	−23.3	36	−13.5	45
Average		**3.4**	**52**	**4.3**	**52**	**4.1**	**55**	0.0	**56**

is replaced by CE and thus no attempt to identify analogue years is made here.

5.1 Median multi-method

As three forecasts are available, the median approach amounts to using the second member in the ranked forecast ensemble. For the NEW ensemble, RI indicates a clear improvement in the 1/1 forecasts as compared with CE, but no improvement in terms of FY^+ (Table 3). The 1/3 forecasts are better than CE 60 % of the time, and MARE is slightly reduced on average. The 1/5 forecasts are slightly better than CE in Sorsele but slightly worse in Vindeln. On average, a slight improvement over CE is found. In the OPE ensemble, the 1/1 forecasts perform slightly better than the NEW ensemble but the 1/3 forecasts clearly worse, as expected from the good performance of CP in these forecasts (Table 2). Overall the performance of the OPE ensemble is very similar to the NEW ensemble (Table 3).

In total, a reduction of MARE by up to 25 % appears attainable for the 1/1 forecasts by the median approach. At the later forecast issue dates, a limited improvement in terms of both RI and FY^+ was attained for Sorsele but not for Vindeln. Over all forecast dates and stations, a slight improvement over CE is indicated. In some cases, the median multi-method performs slightly better than each of the single methods included, generally because very inaccurate single forecasts become eliminated.

5.2 Weighted multi-method

This approach consists of applying weights w between 0 and 1 to the different forecasts and then adding them together. The spring-flood volume forecasted by the weighted multi-method, SFV_{FW}, is thus defined as

$$SFV_{FW} = \sum_{f=1}^{3} w_f \cdot SFV_f \text{ with } \sum_{f=1}^{3} w_f = 1 \text{ and } w_f \geq 0, \qquad (7)$$

where the index f refers to the three different forecast methods available in each of the ensembles NEW and OPE.

One set of weights is chosen for each forecast date. The selection of weights was made based on the evaluations performed in Table 2. With three forecast methods available (in each ensemble), the best performing method (defined by considering both RI and FY^+) was assigned the highest weight 0.5 (= 3/6), the second best performing method the intermediate weight 0.33 (2/6) and the worst performing method the lowest weight 0.17 (1/6).

The weighted NEW set outperforms CE in the 1/1 and 1/3 forecasts for both stations; only the 1/5 forecasts for station Vindeln become notably better by CE (Table 3). In the OPE set, similarly to the median forecast, the 1/3 forecast is notably worse than the NEW set but still with $FY^+ > 50$; the 1/5 forecasts are very similar. In total, weighting is not able to improve the result as compared with median approach in terms of RI. However, over all combinations of forecast dates and stations except the 1/5 forecast in station Vindeln, the weighted forecasts perform better than CE in most years (Table 3). The 1/1 forecasts are better than CE in almost 2/3 of all years with a consistent MARE reduction of 15–20 % in both stations.

It should be emphasized that the same data were thus used both to estimate the weights and to assess the performance of the weighted model, as the 10-year period is too short for proper split-sample calibration and validation. Limited testing however indicated good performance of the fixed-weight approach also for independent validation data. Besides using fixed weights it was also tested to estimate optimal weights based on historical performance. This however turned out to be unfeasible in this study due to the limited historical data available and the associated tendency of overfitting to the calibration data.

6 Concluding remarks

None of the new approaches consistently outperformed the CE method, although improvement was indicated. The largest improvement was found for the 1/1 and 1/3 forecasts using an analogue ensemble based on circulation patterns and for the 1/1 forecasts using statistical downscaling. In these cases the new approach may outperform the CE method up 75 % of the time with an error reduction of ∼ 20 %. In the 1/5 forecasts, none of the new methods clearly outperformed the CE method. By combining the different methods in a multi-method, an overall slight improvement over CE was attained, with a performance for single forecast dates and stations rather close to the best performing individual method. The overall error reduction attainable by the multi-method, ∼ 4 %, may sound limited but it must be emphasized that every percent of forecast improvement potentially corresponds to large financial revenues in energy trading activities. For spring-flood forecasts early in the season, particularly in January, the multi-method clearly outperformed the CE method.

It must be emphasized that these results were obtained in a preliminary feasibility study with limited data and overall basic versions of the used methods. Future studies need to include longer test periods and more stations as well as refined and better tailored versions of the forecast methods. One limitation concerns inhomogeneities of data and forecasts in the study period, e.g. the shift from ERA40 to ERA Interim in 2003 and the shift from 11 to 41 ensemble members in the seasonal forecasts in 2006/2007. A new ECMWF IFS version (4) is now available, but preliminary tests indicate a rather similar performance of SFV forecasts by the approaches concerned, as compared with using the version 3 data as done here. Using bias correction of the P and T input in the DM procedure would likely improve performance, as demonstrated by e.g. Wood et al. (2002), although such pre-processing has limitations in an operational context when new model versions are released. Incorporating hydrological model data, in particular snow information, in the SD method has shown promising results in preliminary tests, especially for improving the forecasts close to the spring-flood period. Development and testing along these lines are ongoing.

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