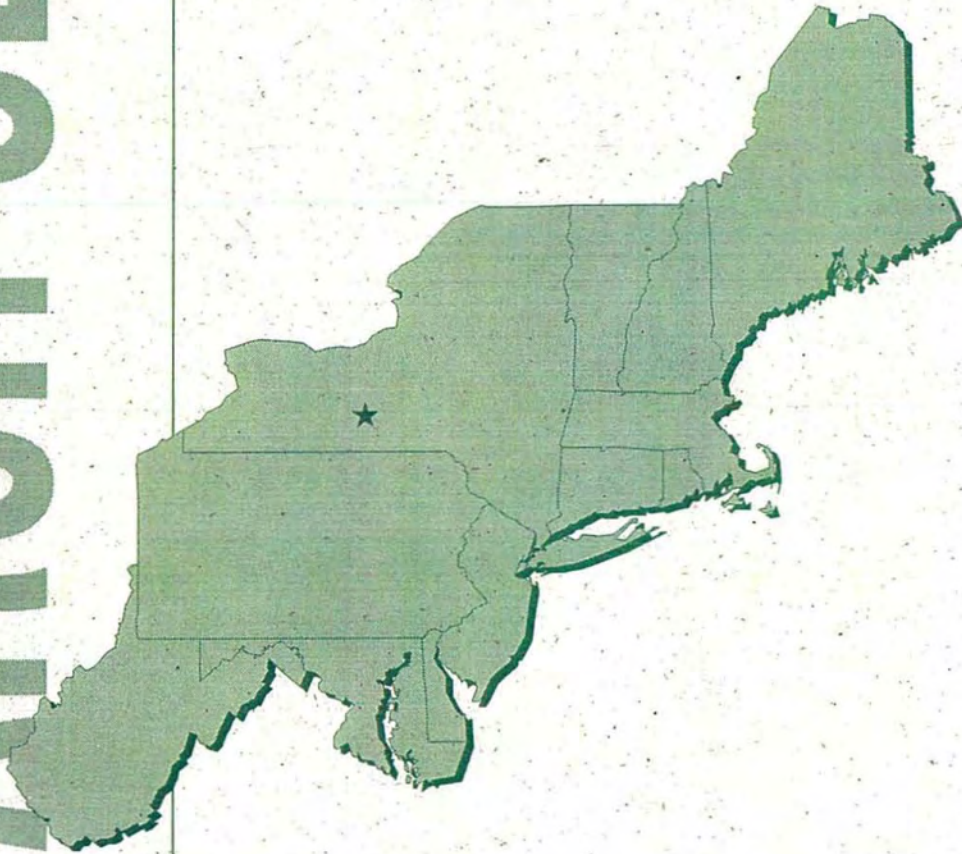


RESEARCH SERIES

NORTHEAST REGIONAL CLIMATE CENTER

Atlas of Precipitation Extremes for the Northeastern United States and Southeastern Canada

Daniel S. Wilks
Richard P. Cember



Cornell University
Ithaca, New York
Publication No. RR 93-5
September 1993

The mission of the Northeast Regional Climate Center (NRCC) is to facilitate and enhance the collection, dissemination and use of climate data as well as to monitor and assess climatic conditions and impacts in the twelve-state, northeastern region of the United States. Implementing this mission involves three programmatic objectives: 1) the development and management of regional climate data bases, 2) the dissemination of information and educational services regarding climate and its impacts, and 3) the performance and support of applied climate research.

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CONTENTS

I. Explanatory Material	
Introduction	1
Using the Atlas	1
The Underlying Data	4
Technical Details	5
Acknowledgements	7
References	7
List of Stations	8
II. Climatic Maps	
One-Day Precipitation Accumulations	
Map 1. 2-year return period	17
Map 2. 5-year return period	18
Map 3. 10-year return period	19
Map 4. 25-year return period	20
Map 5. 50-year return period	21
Map 6. 100-year return period	22
Two-Day Precipitation Accumulations	
Map 7. 2-year return period	23
Map 8. 5-year return period	24
Map 9. 10-year return period	25
Map 10. 25-year return period	26
Map 11. 50-year return period	27
Map 12. 100-year return period	28
Five-Day Precipitation Accumulations	
Map 13. 2-year return period	29
Map 14. 5-year return period	30
Map 15. 10-year return period	31
Map 16. 25-year return period	32
Map 17. 50-year return period	33
Map 18. 100-year return period	34
Ten-Day Precipitation Accumulations	
Map 19. 2-year return period	35
Map 20. 5-year return period	36
Map 21. 10-year return period	37
Map 22. 25-year return period	38
Map 23. 50-year return period	39
Map 24. 100-year return period	40

INTRODUCTION

Extreme precipitation events have the potential to produce localized or widespread flooding, with concomitant damage to property and potential loss of life. The climatology of these very large precipitation events is therefore an important component of engineering design for structures and facilities that must withstand or protect against such events.

The most widely used atlas of precipitation extremes in the U.S., *Rainfall Frequency Atlas of the United States* (Hershfield 1961), also known as Technical Paper 40, is now more than thirty years old. This standard work was based on fitting the Gumbel probability distribution to extreme rainfall data from relatively few stations, with average record length of only 22.6 years. Operationally, it has been found that Technical Paper 40 often underestimates the largest extreme precipitation events (Angel and Huff 1991). It is not clear to what extent this systematic underestimation results from inadequacy of the Gumbel distribution for extrapolation to the important rare events (Jenkinson 1955), or from the insufficient length of record available in 1961. However, it is widely agreed that updating and revision of that document is warranted.

This atlas presents updated statistics of extreme precipitation for the 12-state region designated as the northeastern states for purposes of the Regional Climate Centers program of the National Weather Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. These states are Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, and West Virginia. Data from the states of Ohio, Kentucky, Michigan and Virginia, as well as from the Canadian provinces of Ontario, Quebec, and New Brunswick, have also been included in this project to complete the representation of the mapped fields within the map rectangle encompassing the northeastern U.S.

USING THE ATLAS

The maps in this atlas express extreme precipitation amounts using isohyets corresponding to "average return periods" for 1-day, 2-day, 5-day, and 10-day precipitation totals. That is, it is estimated that precipitation events as large or larger than the magnitudes shown on the maps will be separated, on average, by the number of years given by the return period. It is important to realize that the actual times between two precipitation events of a particular magnitude are not expected to correspond exactly to the return period. Rather, over the course of centuries, the average of the separation times between pairs of these events should be close to the specified return period. Thus the "hundred-year storm," or precipitation amount corresponding to the one hundred year return period, might not occur in a given century, but could occur more than once in some other century. In a hypothetical average over many centuries, however, one would expect about as many occurrences of the hundred-year event at a given location as the number of centuries being averaged.

The data records for most of the stations on which this atlas is based are shorter than one hundred years. This fact implies that the precipitation estimates for the one hundred year return period have been extrapolated beyond the observed data. These extrapolations have been achieved by fitting a theoretical probability function to the observed extreme precipitation data at each station. Precipitation amounts corresponding to shorter (i.e., not necessarily extrapolated) return periods have also been computed using the fitted probability functions, in order to smooth out sampling irregularities in the observed data. The extreme amounts corresponding to particular return periods are computed using equations, given below in the "Technical Details" section, relating probabilities of rare events to the average return periods.

In all cases, the observed data have been represented using the Beta-P distribution (Mielke and Johnson 1974), which was found in exploratory work to give the best results among many candidate distributions for extreme precipitation data in the northeastern U.S. (Wilks 1993). For all stations used to construct the atlas, the underlying data consist of once-daily precipitation measurements. Of the many daily precipitation observations actually available for each station, Beta-P distributions were fit only to the "partial-duration" data, with sample sizes approximately equal to the number of years in each station's data record. That is, the n largest precipitation amounts observed at each station were used, where n equals approximately the number of years of precipitation data available for that station.

Separate maps are presented for 1-day, 2-day, 5-day, and 10-day precipitation accumulations. For the 1-day maps, the once-daily observations appearing in the climatological records for each station were used directly. For the remaining maps, the daily observations were totaled over pairs, sequences of five, and sequences of ten days, respectively. When constructing the partial-duration data for the 2-day, 5-day and 10-day accumulations, care was taken to exclude any overlapping sequences from the analysis. That is, the precipitation observation for any single day can be included in at most one of the sequences making up the partial-duration data for a given accumulation period. When constructing the data for the 2-day accumulation, for example, a day on which a very large precipitation amount was received would make up a pair with either the preceding day or the following day, whichever had the larger precipitation observation. The analysis would not produce two precipitation amounts in the partial duration data that both included a day in common.

Precipitation is routinely observed at a fixed time each day at a given location, which results in a somewhat arbitrary division of time into 24-hour slices. When an important storm is in progress at the scheduled daily observation time, that precipitation will be reported to have occurred over two (or possibly more) days. Many users will find it more meaningful to think in terms of 24-, 48-, 120- and 240-hour precipitation events, rather than the 1-, 2-, 5-, and 10-day accumulations directly available from the climatological record and reported here. One might like to know, for example, the 100-year precipitation for the wettest consecutive 24 hours, regardless of when those hours happened to occur in relation to the standard observation time.

While it is not possible to determine exactly the relationship between, say, the wettest 24 hours and the wettest 1-day precipitation observation for a given storm on the basis of the available daily data, the average relationship can be estimated using the empirical factors given in Table 1, taken from Hershfield (1961). It is important to realize that these empirical factors have *not* been incorporated into the maps in this atlas, in order that the maps reflect only results for the data as observed. The conversion factors in Table 1 are provided for those users who may require estimates of the larger precipitation accumulations that would have been reported if the

Table 1. Empirical adjustment factors that can be used to transform precipitation amounts pertaining to calendar day observations, to estimates of maximum precipitation regardless of observation time. From Hershfield (1961).

To convert from precipitation over this many days	To maximum precipitation over this many hours	Multiply by
1	24	1.13
2	48	1.05
5	120	1.01
10	240	1.01

Table 2. Empirical adjustment factors that can be used to transform precipitation amounts pertaining to 24-hour accumulations to estimates of precipitation for shorter time periods. From Huff and Angel (1992).

To estimate maximum precipitation over	Multiply the precipitation amount from the 1-day maps by
18 hours	1.06
12 hours	0.98
6 hours	0.85
3 hours	0.72
2 hours	0.66
1 hour	0.53
30 minutes	0.42
15 minutes	0.31
10 minutes	0.24
5 minutes	0.14

observations were not constrained to occur at fixed times. Notice that these empirical conversion factors decrease quite sharply for the longer accumulation periods, indicating that a substantial fraction of the precipitation in the wettest 24 hours is expected on average to be distributed over a second daily observation, but that the 5- and 10-day periods are long enough that there is usually very little difference between calendar-day observations and arbitrarily located observation windows of the same lengths.

Similarly, many users will require estimates of extreme precipitation amounts occurring over periods shorter than 24 hours. While these can not be obtained directly from daily observations, they can be estimated using the empirical adjustment factors given in Table 2. These factors have been taken from Huff and Angel (1992), and correspond closely to those given in Hershfield (1961).

Example: Suppose the 100-year, 1-day precipitation for a location of interest, from Map 6, is 5.00 inches. The corresponding 100-year 24-hour precipitation (i.e., the estimated 24-hour, hundred-year precipitation regardless of the observation time) would be obtained by multiplying by the factor 1.13 from Table 1, yielding $5.00 \times 1.13 = 5.65$ inches. The estimated 100-year event for a 1-hour precipitation accumulation at this same location would be obtained, using Table 2, as $5.00 \times 0.53 = 2.65$ inches.

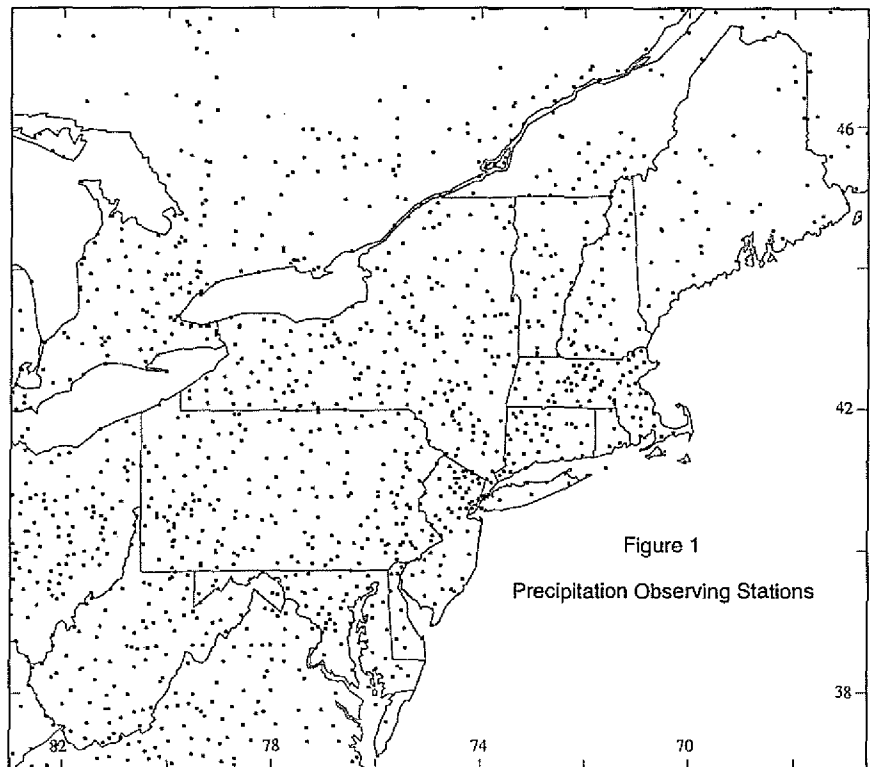
Finally, it should be realized that the maps in this atlas are likely to exhibit a bias in regions containing large topographic variations. This is because the places where the precipitation measurements have been made tend to be locations where people live and work, which are generally valley locations in preference to those at higher elevations. Cember and Wilks (1993) found that the existing station locations effectively underestimate average elevations in mountainous areas of the northeastern U.S. by about 500 feet.

Therefore, the mapped quantities in this atlas should accurately reflect climatological conditions at locations typical of the observing stations, but should be expected to underestimate extreme precipitation amounts at elevations substantially above the local settlements.

THE UNDERLYING DATA

This atlas has been prepared using daily precipitation data for the 1473 stations listed in Table 3. These data were obtained from the archives of the Northeast Regional Climate Center (Ithaca, New York), the National Climatic Data Center (Asheville, North Carolina), and the Canadian Climate Centre (Downsview, Ontario). The locations of most of the stations listed in Table 3 are shown in Figure 1, on the same base map used to represent the precipitation extremes in this atlas. Those stations not shown in Figure 1 were included in the analysis to improve the representation at the edges of the maps. They are located within about 1° of longitude of the map rectangle to the east and west, within about 2° of latitude to the north, and extend to the southern borders of Virginia and Kentucky to the south.

Data from climatological stations within the domain of this atlas were included only if they contained at least 30 years of record. That is, a station was included only if at least 10,958 daily observations passing quality-control screening existed in its record. The average record length of included stations was 51.3 years, with more than 100 years being available at a few stations. The maps have been constructed in a way that gives more weight in the spatial analysis to stations with longer data records.



TECHNICAL DETAILS

The Beta-P Distribution and Computation of Return Periods. Smoothing and extrapolation of the observed extreme precipitation data for all stations was done by fitting the Beta-P distribution (Mielke and Johnson, 1974). The probability density function for this distribution is

$$f(x) = \frac{\alpha\theta}{\beta} \left(\frac{x}{\beta}\right)^{\theta-1} \left[1 + \left(\frac{x}{\beta}\right)^{\theta}\right]^{-(\alpha+1)}, \quad (1)$$

where x is the random variable (here, partial-duration precipitation amounts), which must be nonnegative. The distribution has three parameters: α and θ are dimensionless shape parameters, and β is a scale parameter having the same physical units as the random variable. The three parameters are constrained to be positive. The distributions were fit to data for each station by maximum likelihood, using the Levenberg-Marquardt method (Press et al. 1986), as described in Wilks (1993). One convenient feature of the Beta-P distribution is that it is analytically integrable, so that its cumulative distribution function can be written in closed form. That is, Beta-P probabilities can be obtained using

$$F(x) = \Pr\{X \leq x\} = \int_0^x f(x) dx = 1 - \left[1 + \left(\frac{x}{\beta}\right)^{\theta}\right]^{-\alpha}. \quad (2)$$

Average return periods, R , relate to cumulative probabilities, F , of the distributions of partial-duration data according to

$$R = \frac{1}{\omega [1 - F(x)]}, \quad (3)$$

where ω is the average frequency with which the partial-duration data samples the full record of daily observations, in years^{-1} . For the present analysis, the average sampling frequency was chosen to be close to 1 yr^{-1} , but because individual data records may start and stop on different dates and may contain different numbers of missing data, ω varies slightly from station to station. Let N represent the number of daily observations passing the quality control screening that are available for a particular station. The partial-duration data were then constructed to consist of the largest n precipitation accumulations, where n is the greatest integer not exceeding $N/365.25$. This convention results in the average sampling frequency being

$$\omega = \frac{365.25 n}{N} \text{ yr}^{-1}. \quad (4)$$

Precipitation amounts, x , corresponding to specified return periods are obtained by inverting Equation 2 (i.e., solving it for x), and substituting the expression $F(x) = 1 - 1/\omega R$ obtained by rearrangement of Equation 3. These operations yield the expression for precipitation amounts as a function of return period, and of the parameters of the fitted Beta-P distribution,

$$x = \beta \left[(\omega R)^{1/\alpha} - 1 \right]^{1/\theta}. \quad (5)$$

Quality Control Procedure. Quality control of extreme precipitation amounts is difficult, owing to the high spatial and temporal variability of this quantity. Daily amounts larger than 5 inches were screened here for coherence with nearby locations. To be considered valid, precipitation amounts of 10 inches or more had to be corroborated by occurrence of at least 5 inches of precipitation at each of at least two

stations within 200 miles on the same day, the previous day, or the following day. Precipitation amounts between 5 inches and 10 inches were considered valid if corroborated by at least two stations within 200 miles reporting at least 3 inches of precipitation on the same day, the previous day, or the following day.

In the data-sparse regions of the northwestern and northeastern corners of the domain, these criteria were relaxed to allow corroboration if only one station within the 200 mile radius reported a large precipitation amount as specified above. Early in the climatological record, the station density is too sparse to allow spatial comparison of precipitation amounts in this way. The quality control procedure was implemented beginning in 1927 for stations in the U.S., in 1871 for stations in Ontario, in 1883 for stations in Quebec, and in 1891 for stations in New Brunswick. All reasonable data values for records preceding these dates have been accepted into the analysis.

Interpolation, Gridding, Smoothing and Contouring. This atlas has been prepared by first gridding individual station values, and then producing the contour maps from the gridded fields by automated means.

Precipitation amounts corresponding to the specified return periods were cast into a 54 x 82 (latitude x longitude) grid, with points spaced at 0.2° intervals. This grid is confined to the map rectangle, but stations outside the rectangle were also used to improve the representation at the map edge, as noted above. The gridding algorithm finds the smallest circle around each gridpoint that encloses at least two stations, where the circle radius is an integer multiple of 0.2 great circle degrees. If the circle has a radius of 1.4° or less, the grid point is assigned a weighted average of the station values enclosed. Otherwise, the grid point is assigned a missing value code.

Each grid point value is computed as

$$z_g(\lambda_g, \phi_g) = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^I w_i(\lambda_g, \phi_g, \lambda_i, \phi_i) z_i(\lambda_i, \phi_i)}{\sum_{i=1}^I w_i(\lambda_g, \phi_g, \lambda_i, \phi_i)}, \quad (6)$$

where w_i is a modified McLain (1974) weighting function

$$w_i(\lambda_g, \phi_g, \lambda_i, \phi_i) = \frac{\sqrt{N_i} \exp\left[-\frac{\cos^2 \phi_0 (\lambda_g - \lambda_i)^2 + (\phi_g - \phi_i)^2}{d_{\text{scale}}^2}\right]}{f + \frac{\cos^2 \phi_0 (\lambda_g - \lambda_i)^2 + (\phi_g - \phi_i)^2}{d_{\text{scale}}^2}} \quad (7)$$

Here z represents precipitation amount, λ is longitude, ϕ is latitude, the subscript g refers to the grid point, the subscript i distinguishes among the I individual stations within each circle, and N_i is the sample size of the precipitation data at station i . The parameter $d_{\text{scale}} = 1.2^\circ$ is a scaling distance, $\phi_0 = 42.45^\circ$ is a reference latitude, and $f = 10^{-6}$ is a small constant used to prevent division by zero.

The gridded fields were smoothed using the moving average in a 3 x 3 cell window, i.e., by an unweighted averaging of each grid point with its eight adjacent neighbors. These smoothed gridded values were contoured and plotted using the NCAR Graphics software package, version 3.00 (Clare and Kennison 1989).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

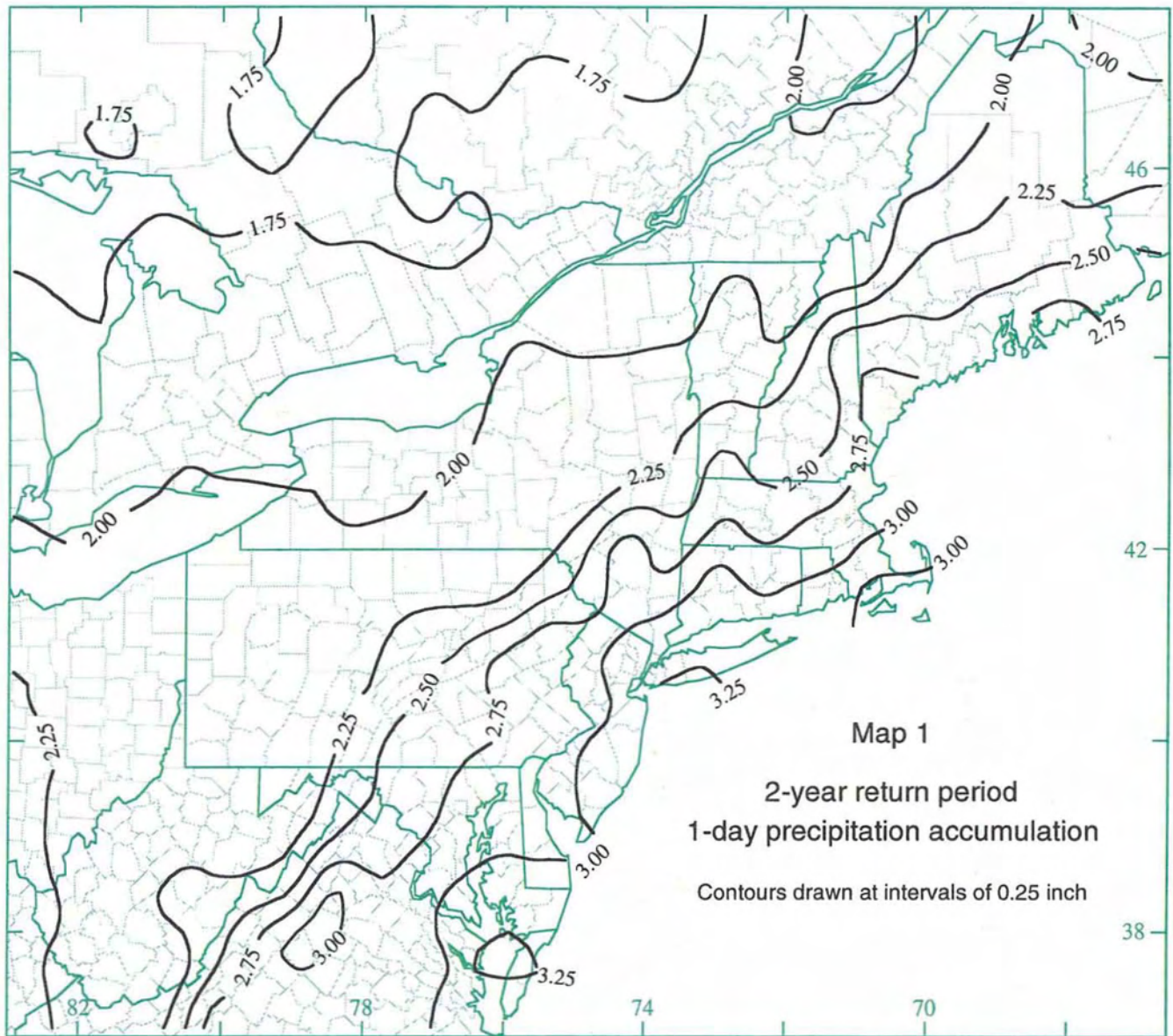
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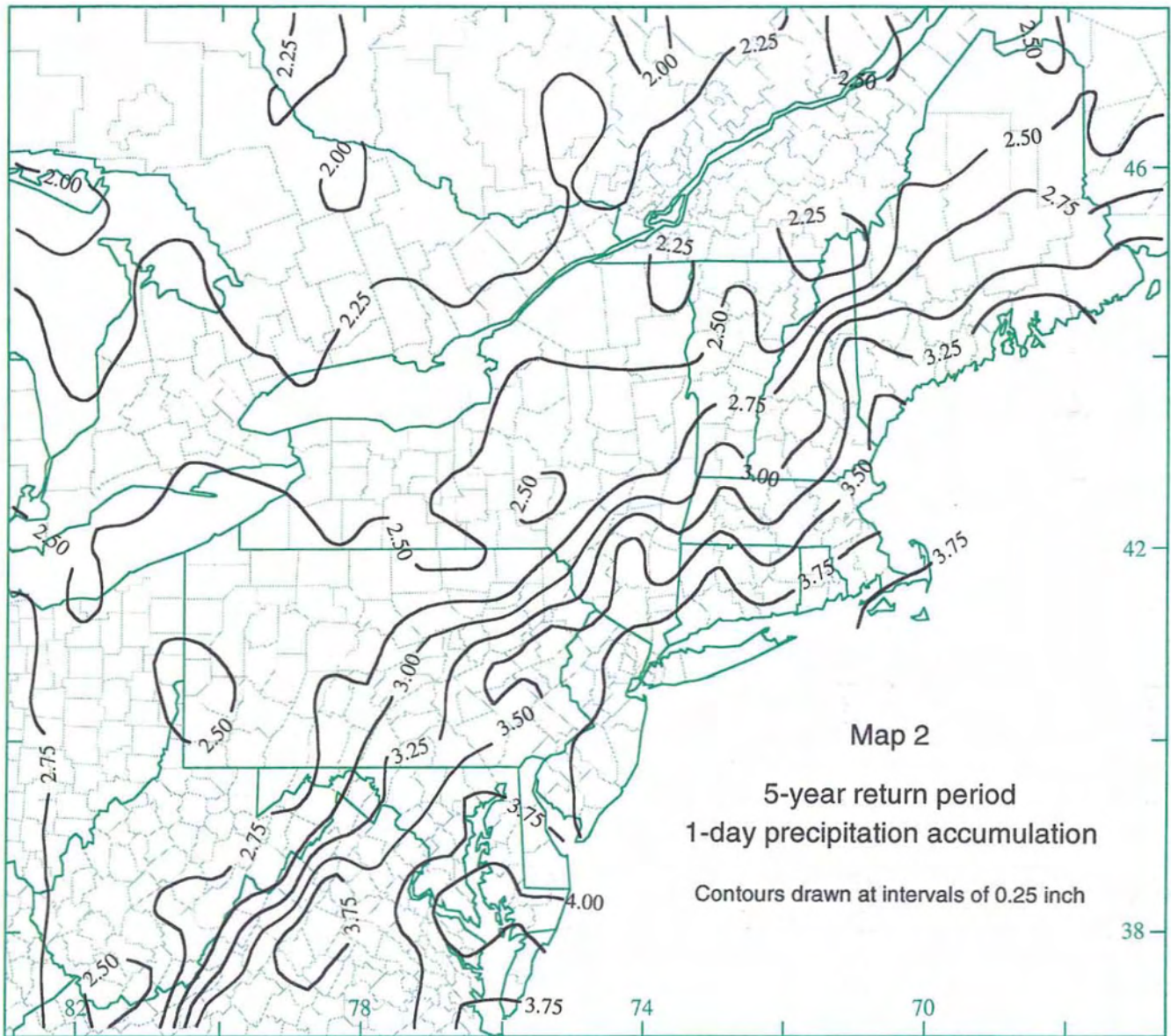
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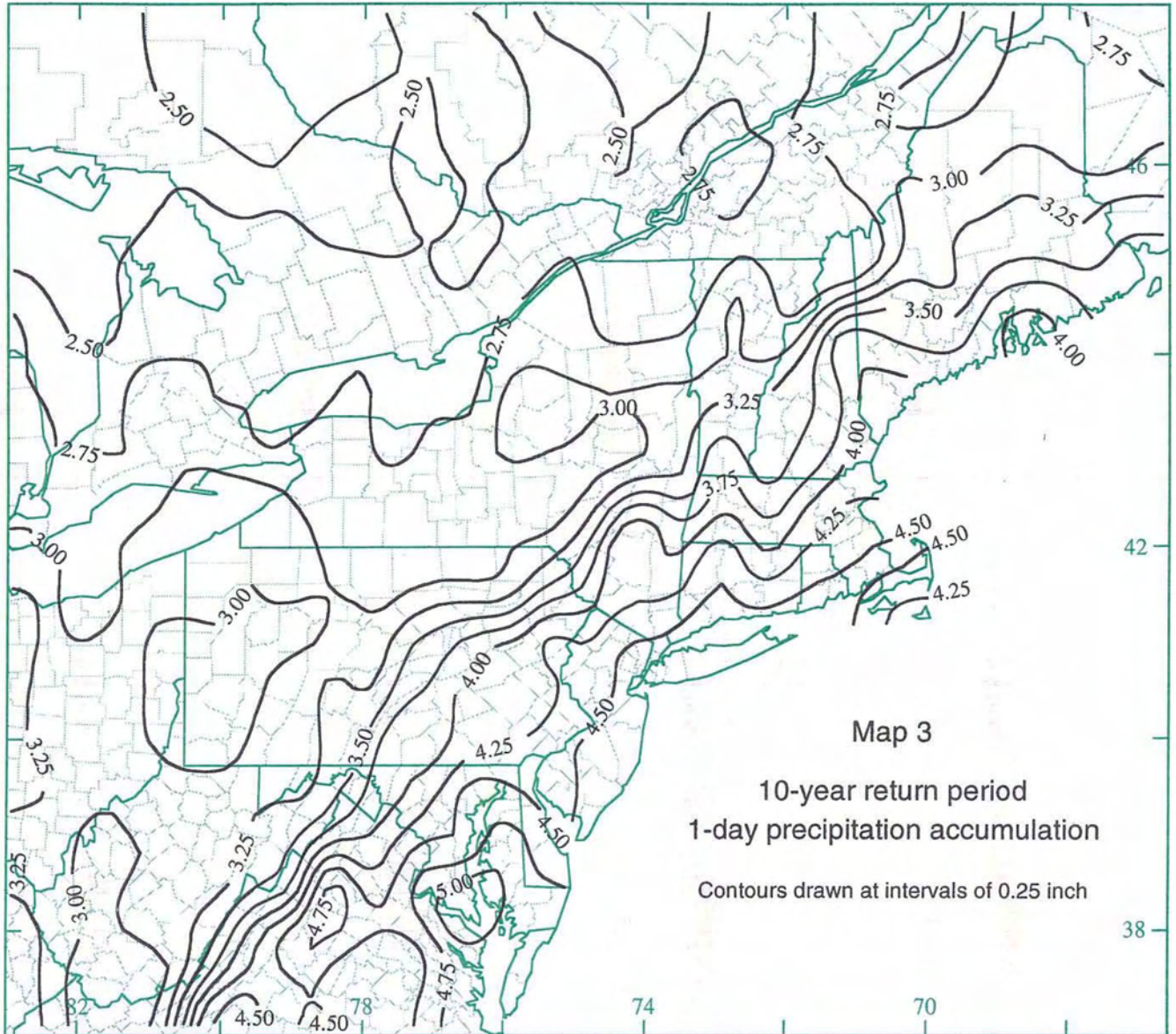
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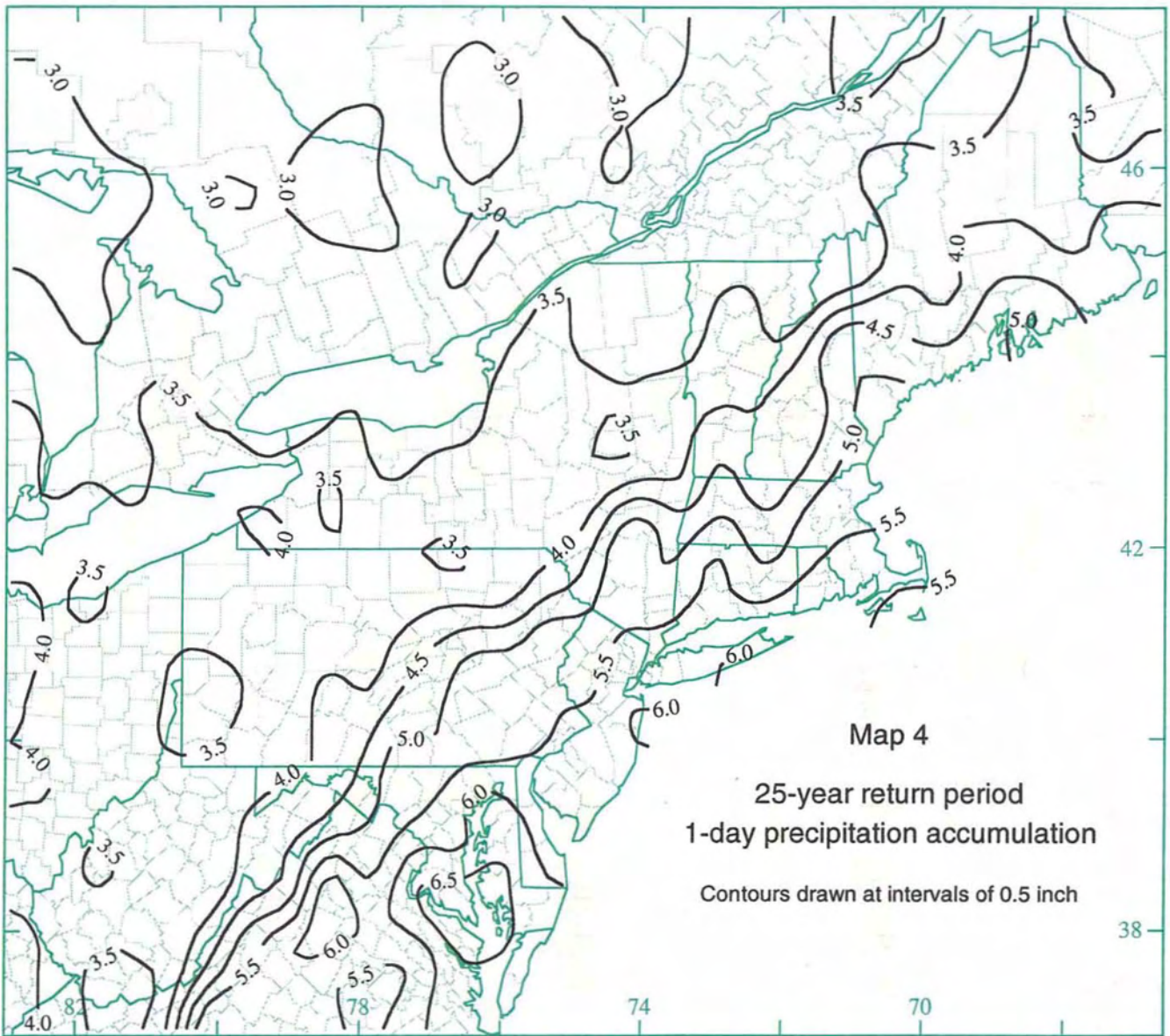
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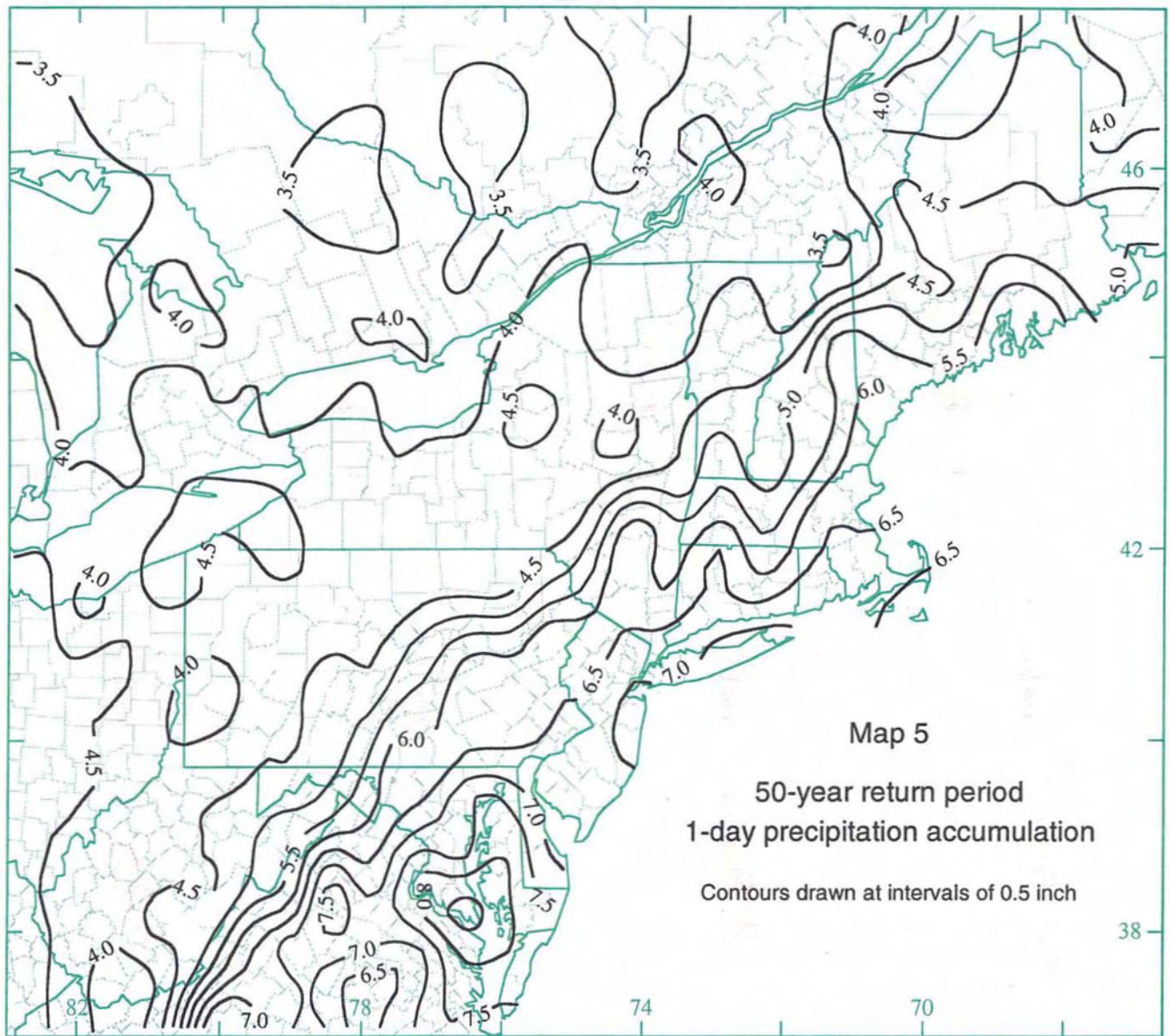
Station number	Station name	Latitude (degrees)	Longitude (degrees)	Record begins	Record ends
QUEBEC (continued)					
7080600	BELLETERRE	47.38	78.70	1951	1990
7082880	GRAND LAC VICTORIA	47.83	77.37	1927	1984
7083480	KIPAWA LANIEL	47.05	79.27	1920	1990
7084560	MANNEVILLE	48.55	78.48	1949	1990
7086400	RAPIDE-SEPT	47.77	78.30	1941	1975
7088760	VILLE MARIE	47.35	79.43	1913	1990
7090050	ABITIBI POST	48.72	79.37	1896	1936
7090120	AMOS	48.57	78.13	1913	1990
7092480	FORT GEORGE	53.83	79.00	1915	1969
7094120	LA SARRE	48.78	79.22	1951	1990
7095000	MISTASSINI POST	50.42	73.88	1885	1980
7095480	NITCHEQUON	53.20	70.90	1942	1985
7098360	TASCHEREAU	48.67	78.70	1951	1990
7098600	VAL D'OR A	48.07	77.78	1951	1990
NEW BRUNSWICK					
8100100	ACADIA FOREST EXP ST	45.98	66.37	1955	1990
8100200	ALMA	45.60	64.95	1950	1990
8100300	AROOSTOOK	46.80	67.72	1929	1990
8100500	BATHURST	47.62	65.65	1872	1972
8100701	CAMPBELLTON POWER ST	48.00	66.68	1937	1978
8100990	CHATHAM	47.05	65.48	1873	1947
8101000	CHATHAM A	47.02	65.45	1943	1990
8101100	CHIPMAN	46.18	65.87	1931	1967
8101170	DALHOUSIE	48.07	66.37	1872	1916
8101200	DOAKTOWN	46.55	66.15	1934	1990
8101300	EDMUNDSTON	47.37	68.33	1913	1957
8101301	EDMUNDSTON FRASER CO	47.37	68.33	1949	1979
8101500	FREDERICTON A	45.87	66.53	1951	1990
8101600	FREDERICTON CDA	45.92	66.62	1913	1990
8101700	FREDERICTON UNB	45.95	66.60	1871	1952
8101800	GAGETOWN 2	45.78	66.15	1897	1990
8101900	GRAND FALLS	47.05	67.73	1913	1966
8101920	GRAND MANAN	44.73	66.77	1874	1965
8102200	HARVEY STATION	45.73	67.00	1920	1976
8102300	KEDGWICK	47.65	67.35	1931	1990
8102600	MCADAM	45.58	67.33	1872	1976
8103000	MINTO	46.03	66.03	1954	1990
8103100	MONCTON	46.10	64.78	1881	1990
8103200	MONCTON A	46.12	64.68	1939	1990
8103400	MUSQUASH	45.20	66.33	1922	1981
8103500	NEPISIGUIT FALLS	47.40	65.78	1922	1990
8103800	OROMOCTO	45.83	66.47	1957	1990
8104100	POINT ESCUMINAC	47.12	64.82	1885	1951
8104200	POINT LEPREAU	45.07	66.47	1872	1952
8104400	REXTON	46.67	64.87	1922	1990
8104500	SACKVILLE	45.90	64.38	1878	1980
8104600	ST ANDREWS	45.08	67.08	1874	1990
8104700	ST GEORGE	45.13	66.83	1919	1981
8104800	SAINT JOHN	45.28	66.08	1871	1970
8104900	SAINT JOHN A	45.32	65.88	1946	1990
8105200	SUSSEX	45.72	65.53	1897	1990
8105600	WOODSTOCK	46.15	67.58	1886	1990

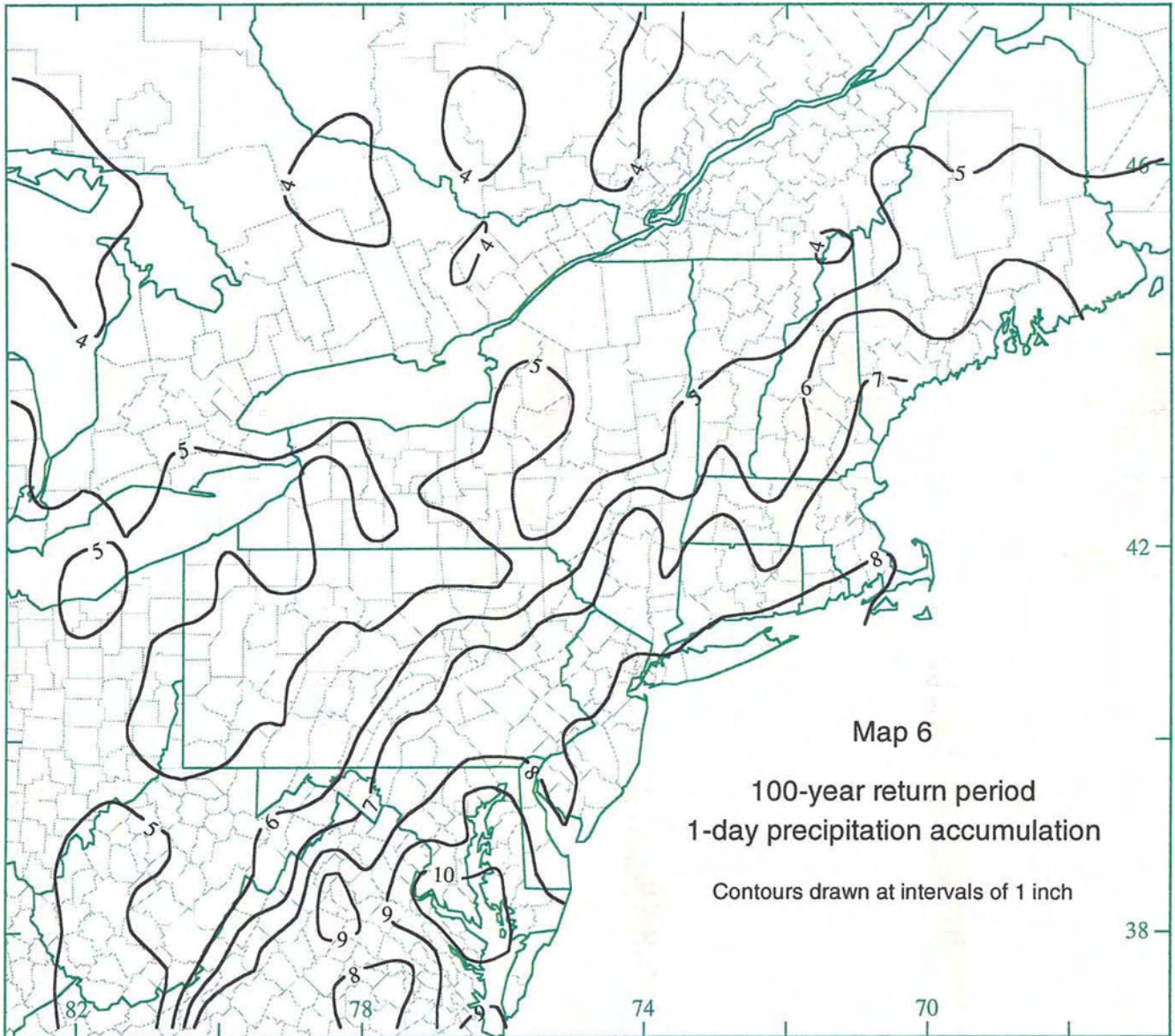


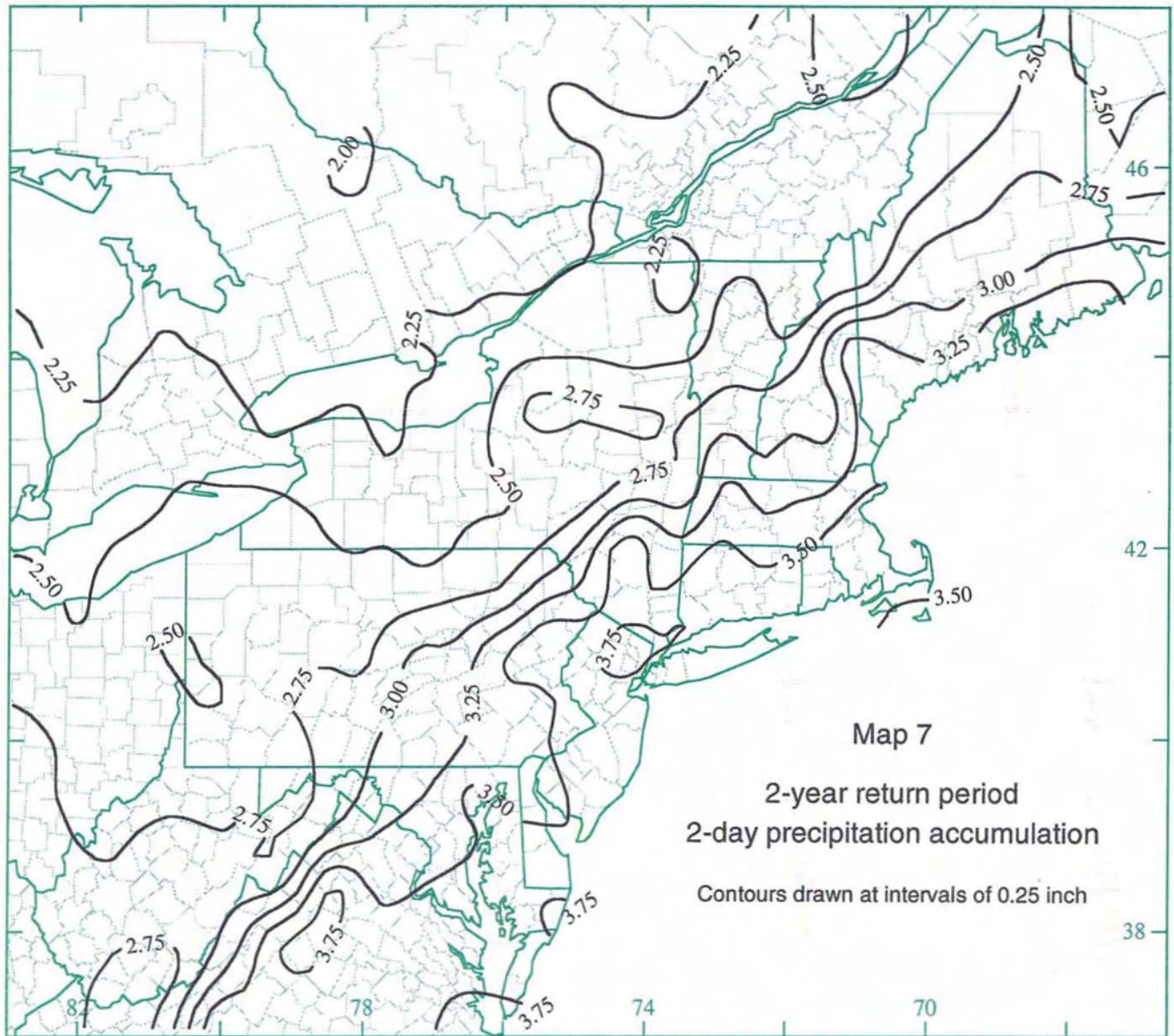


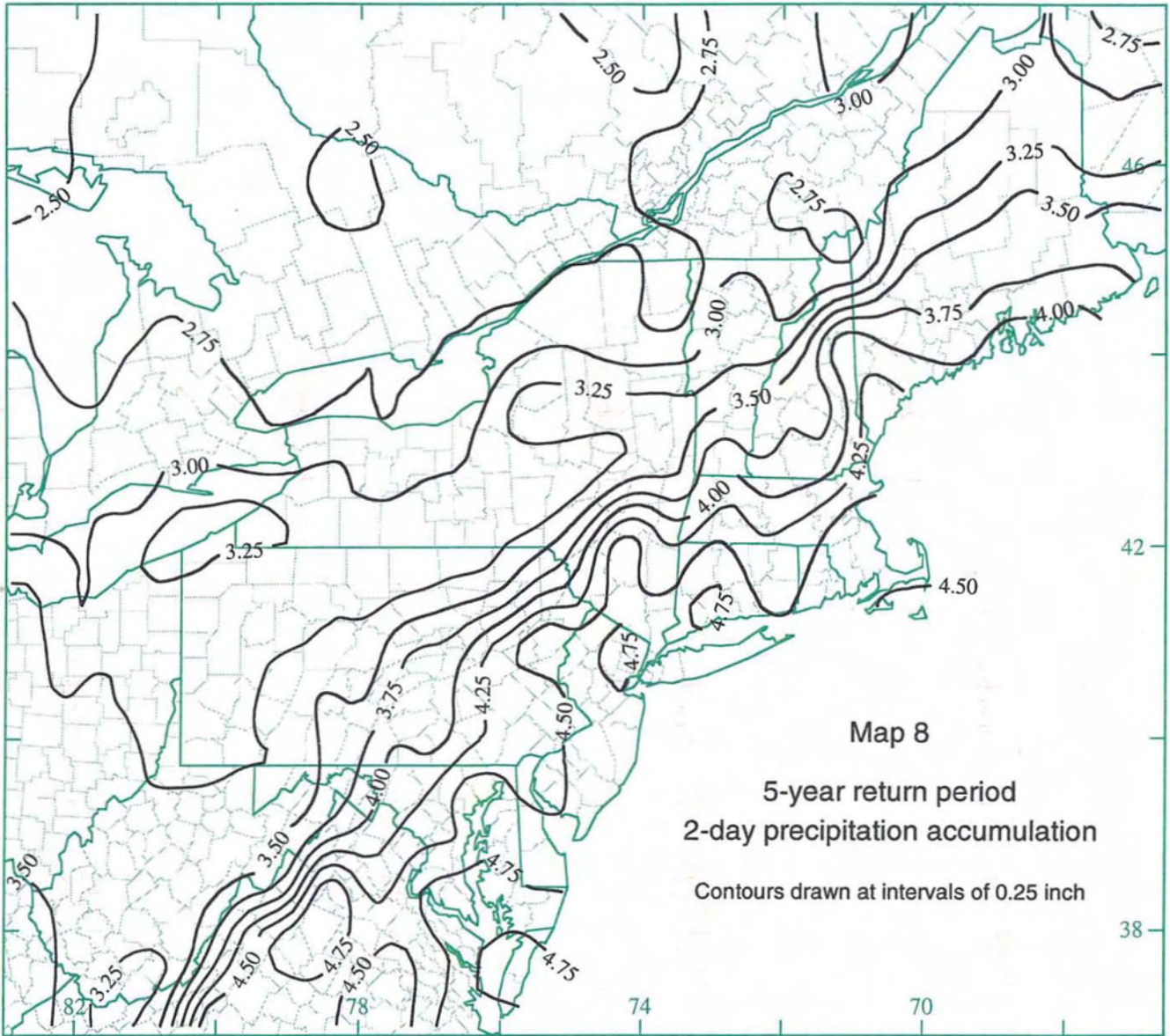


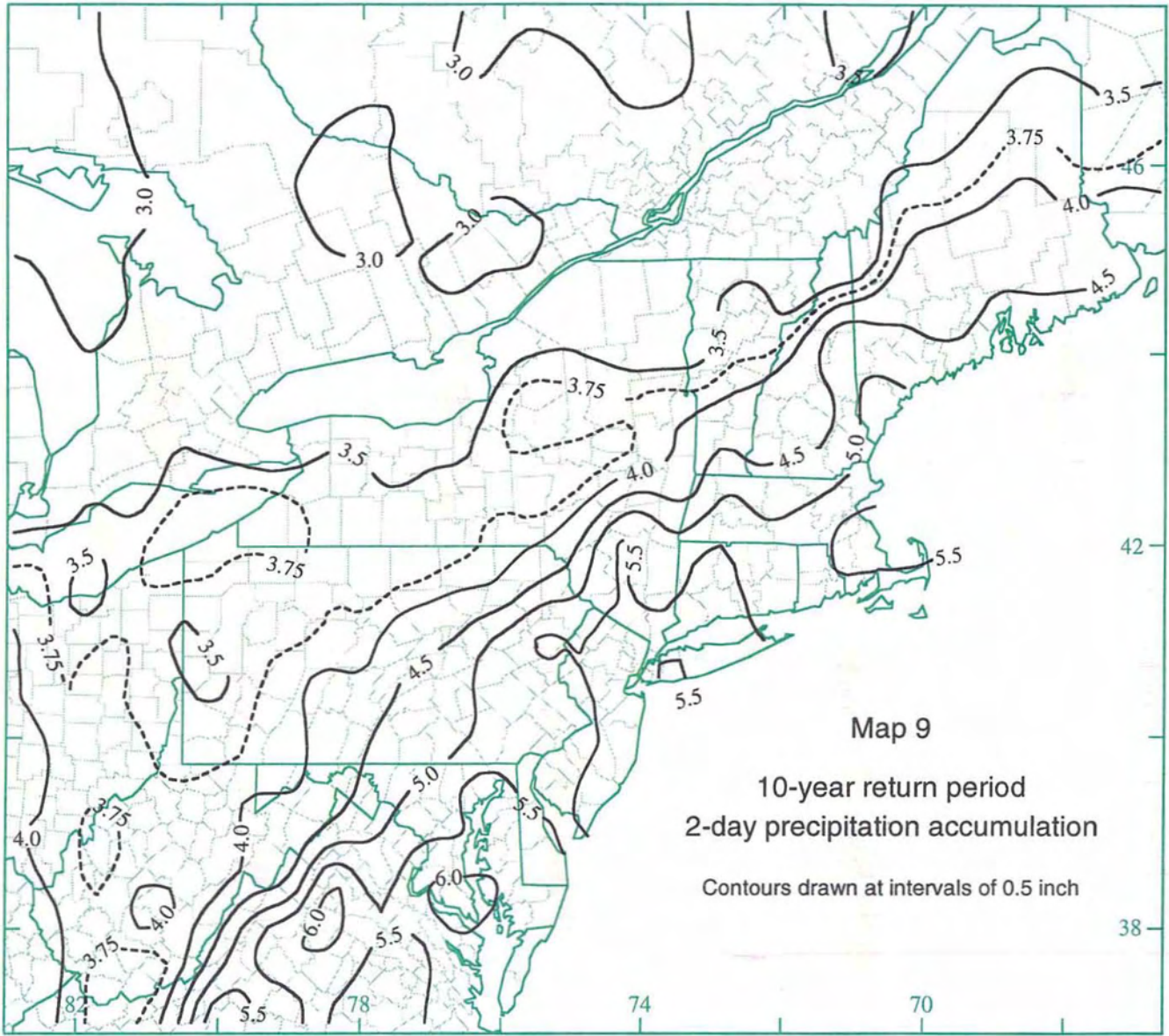


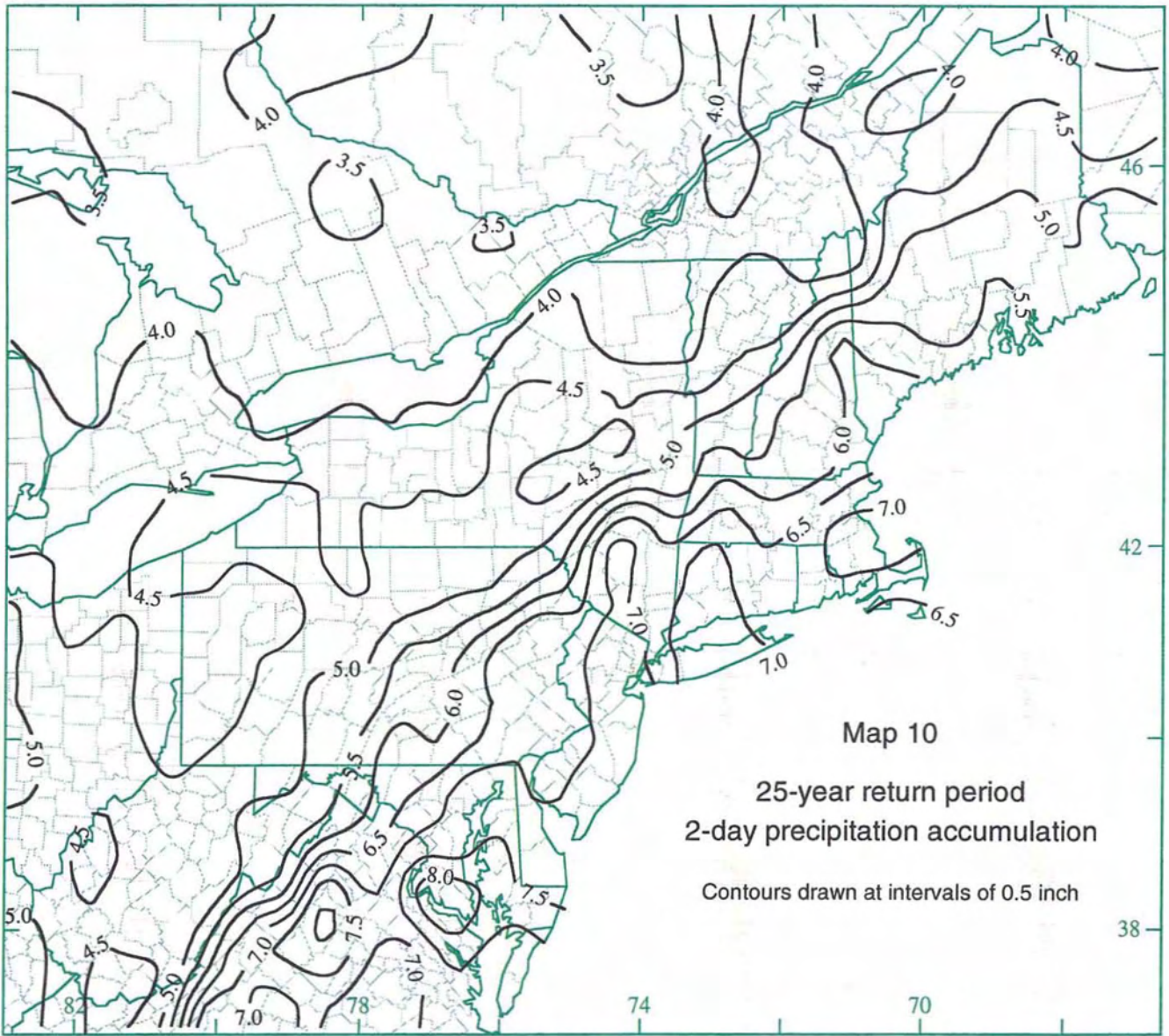


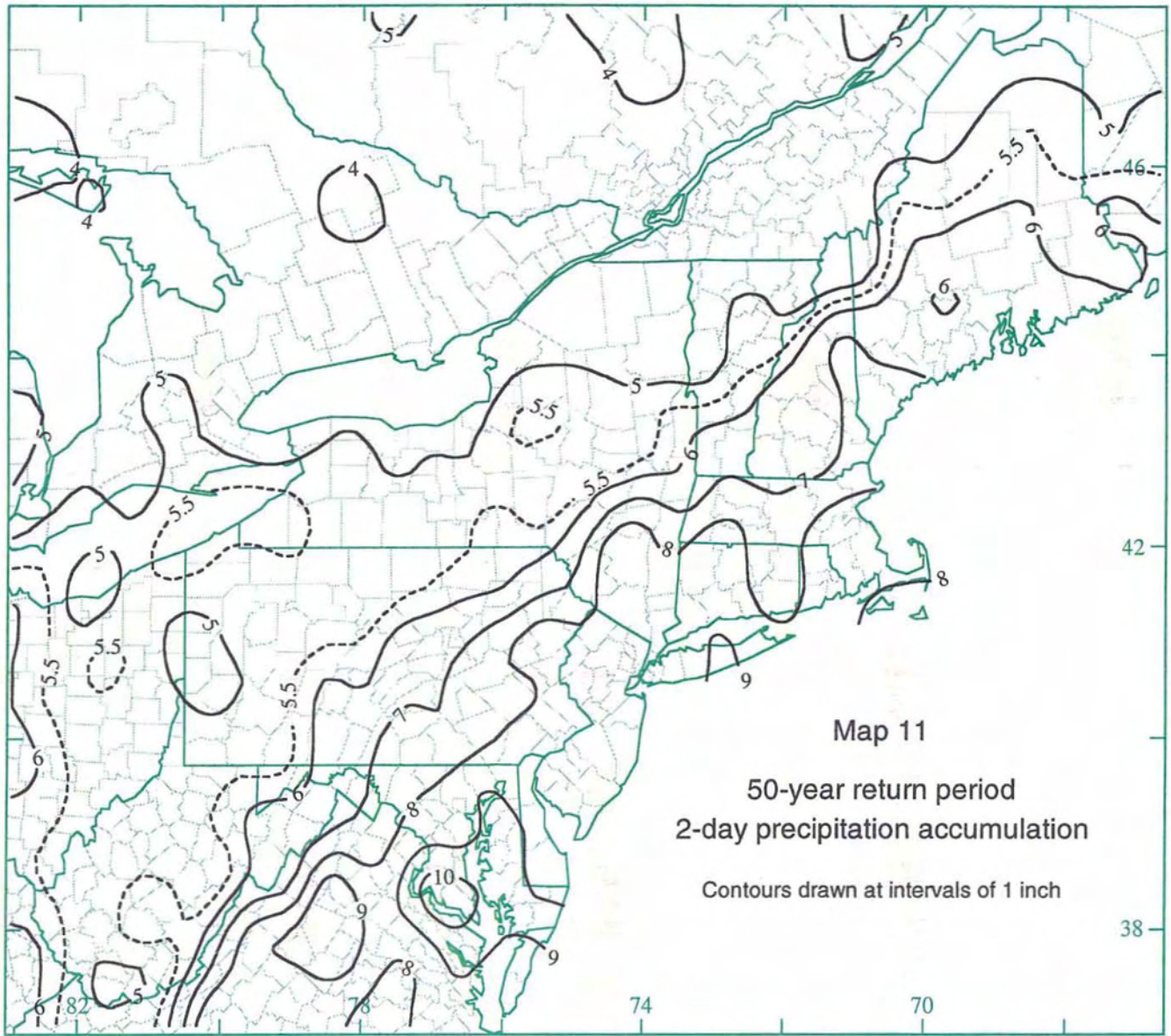


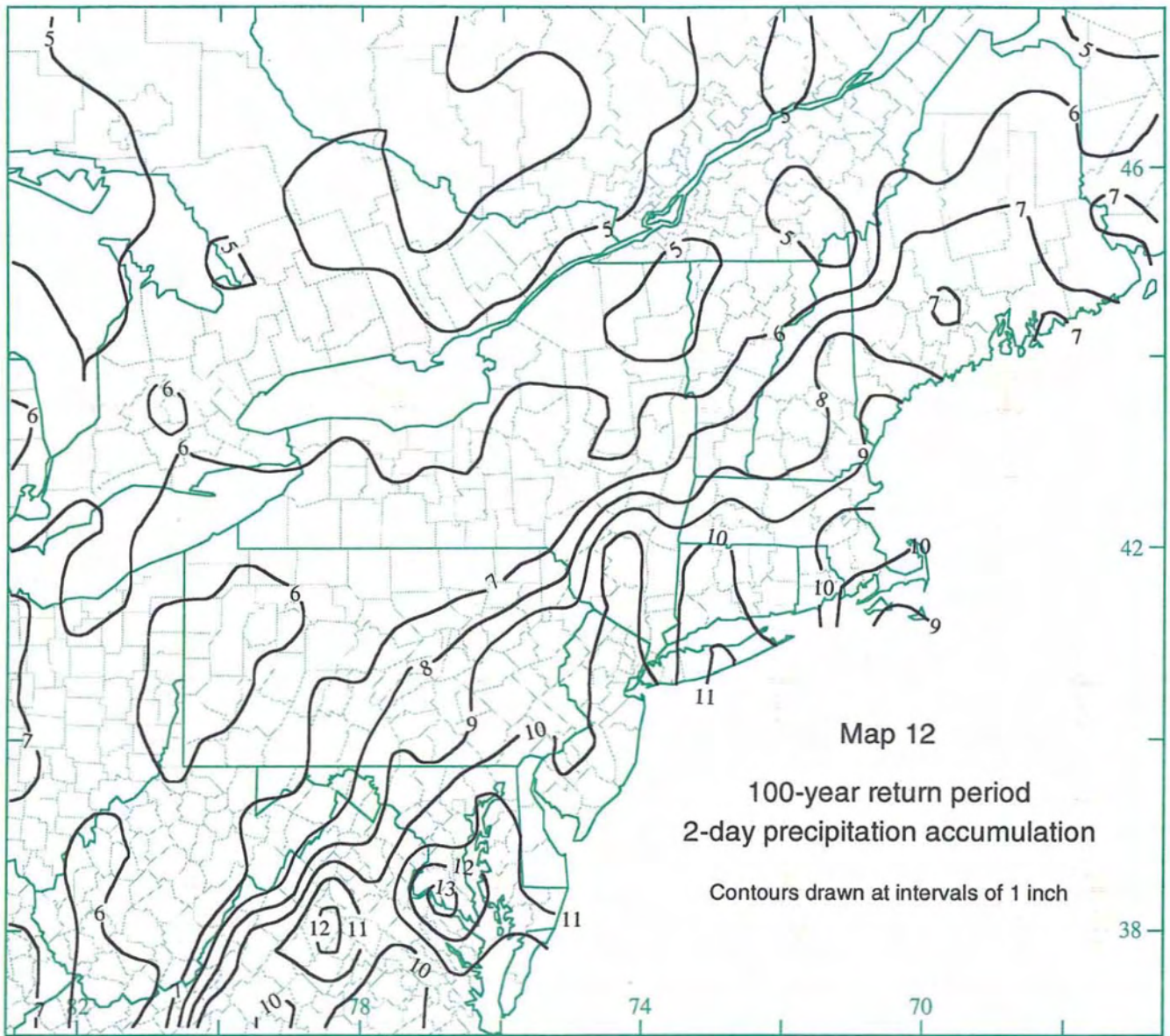


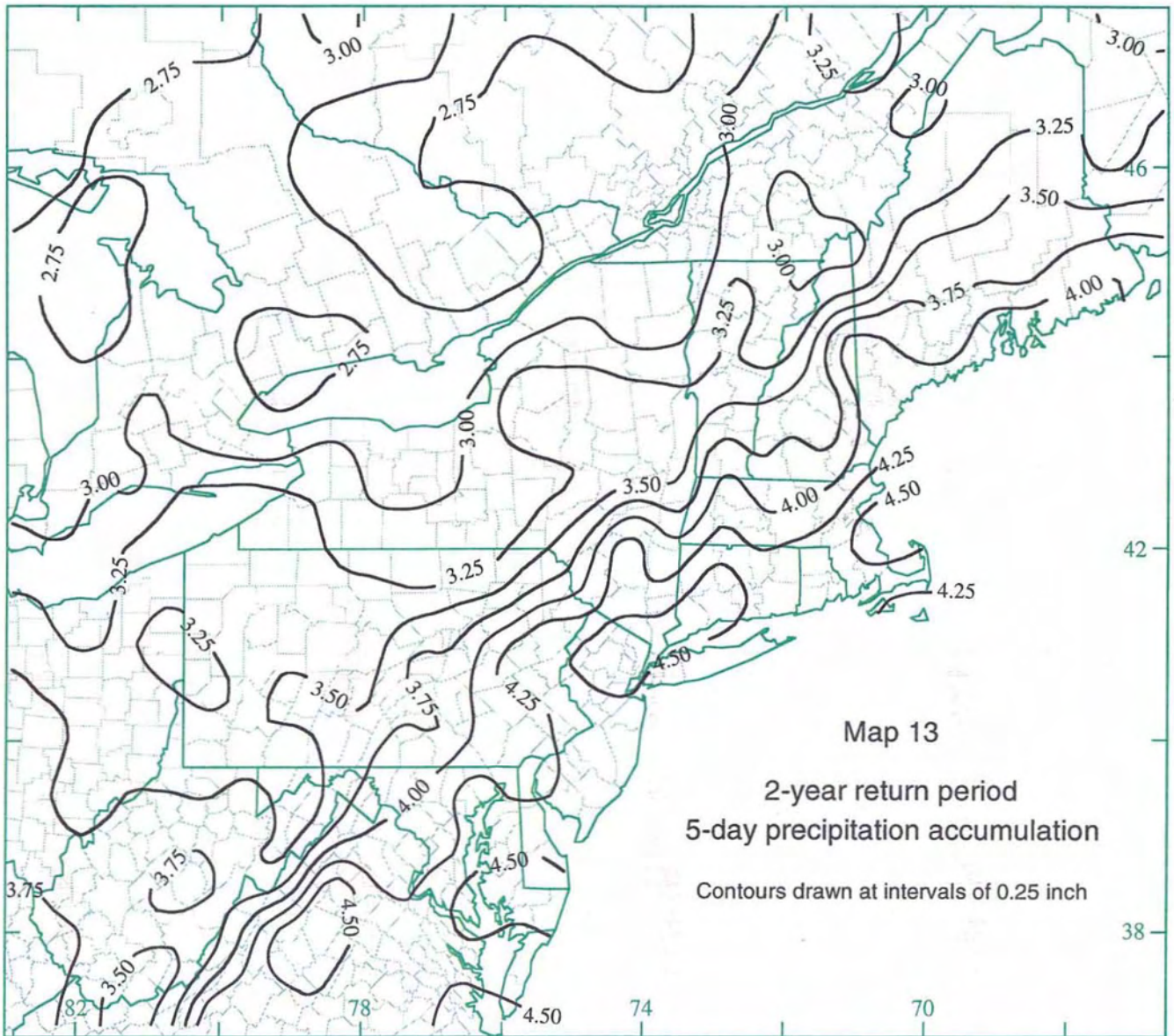


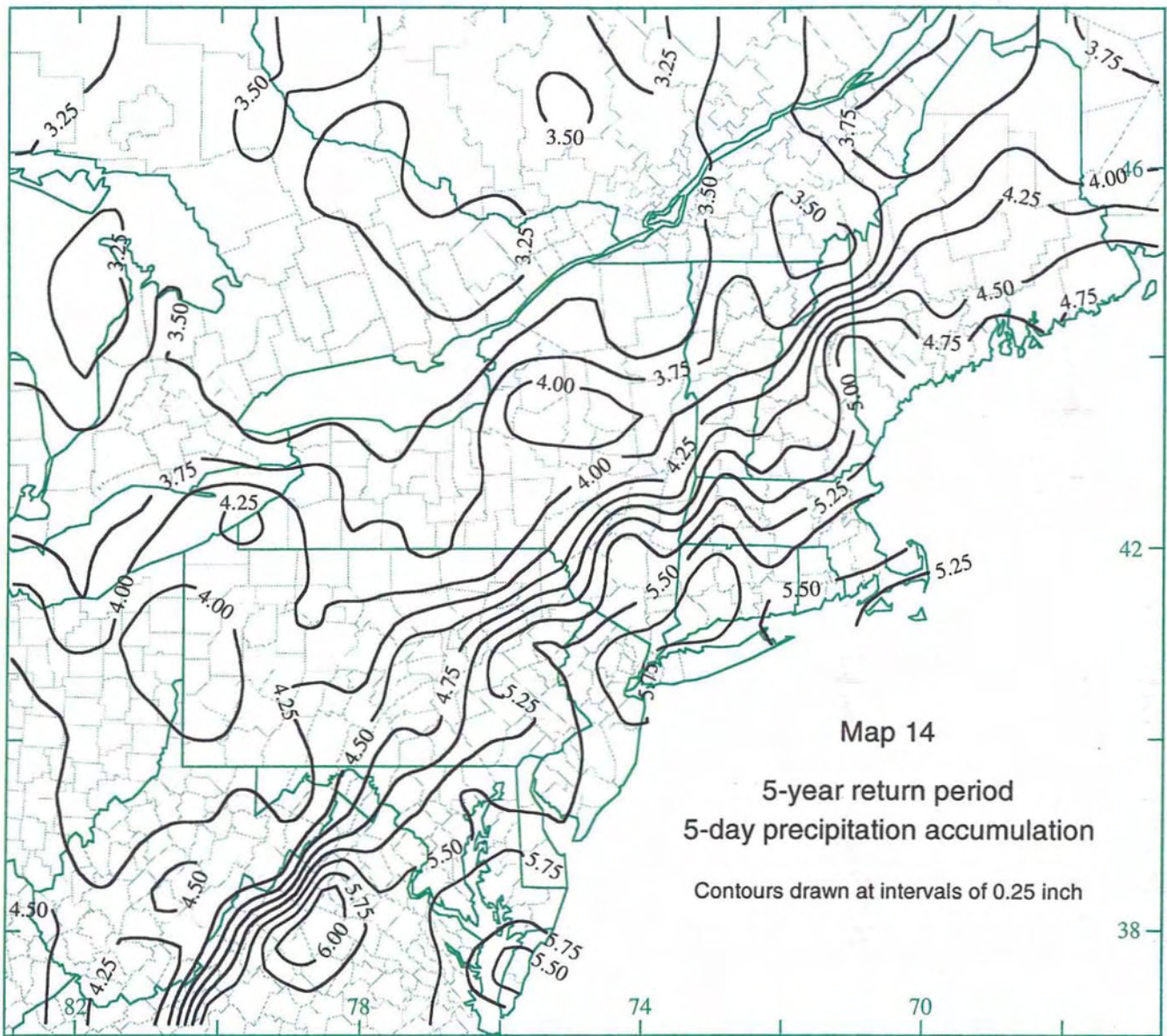


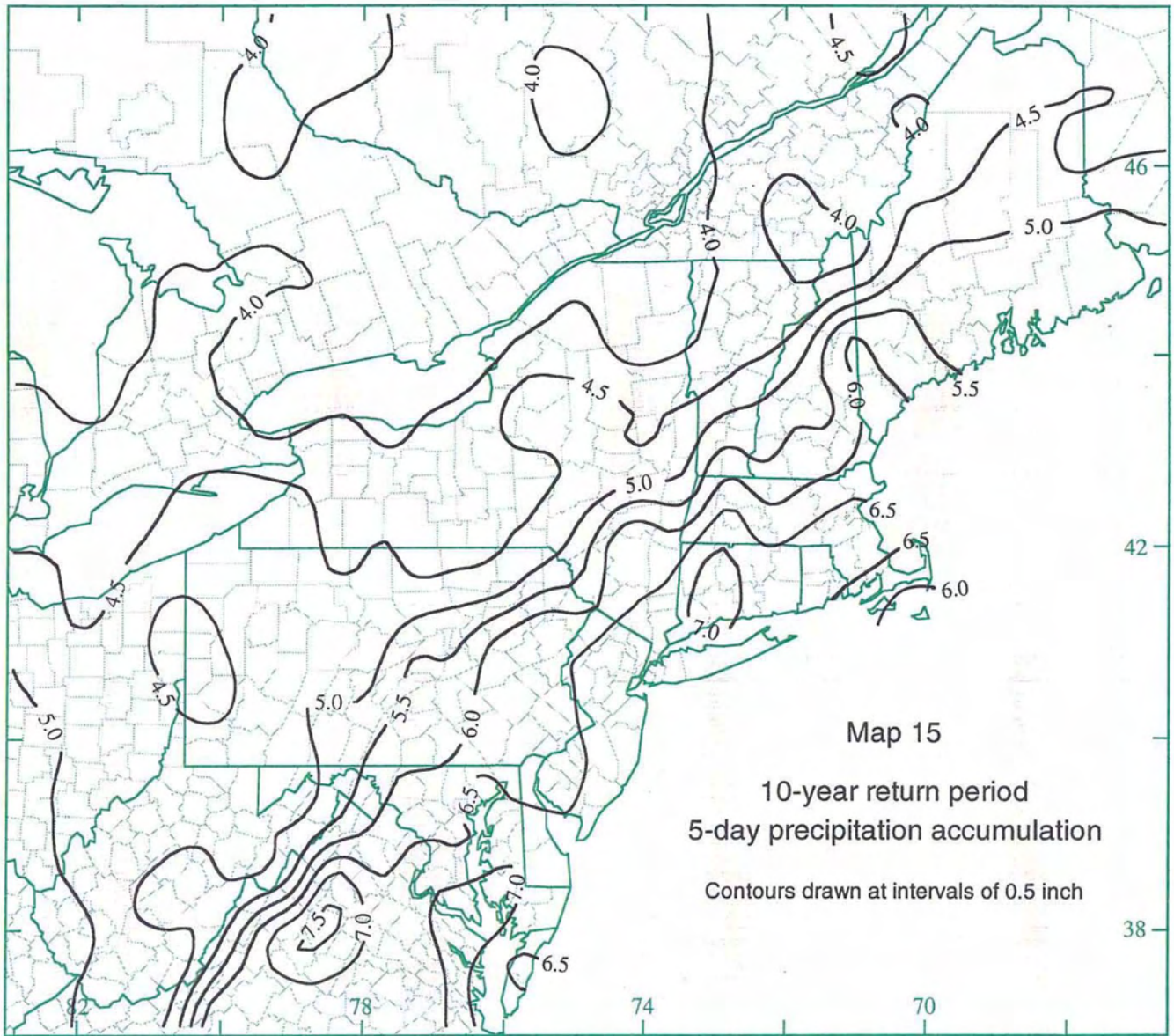


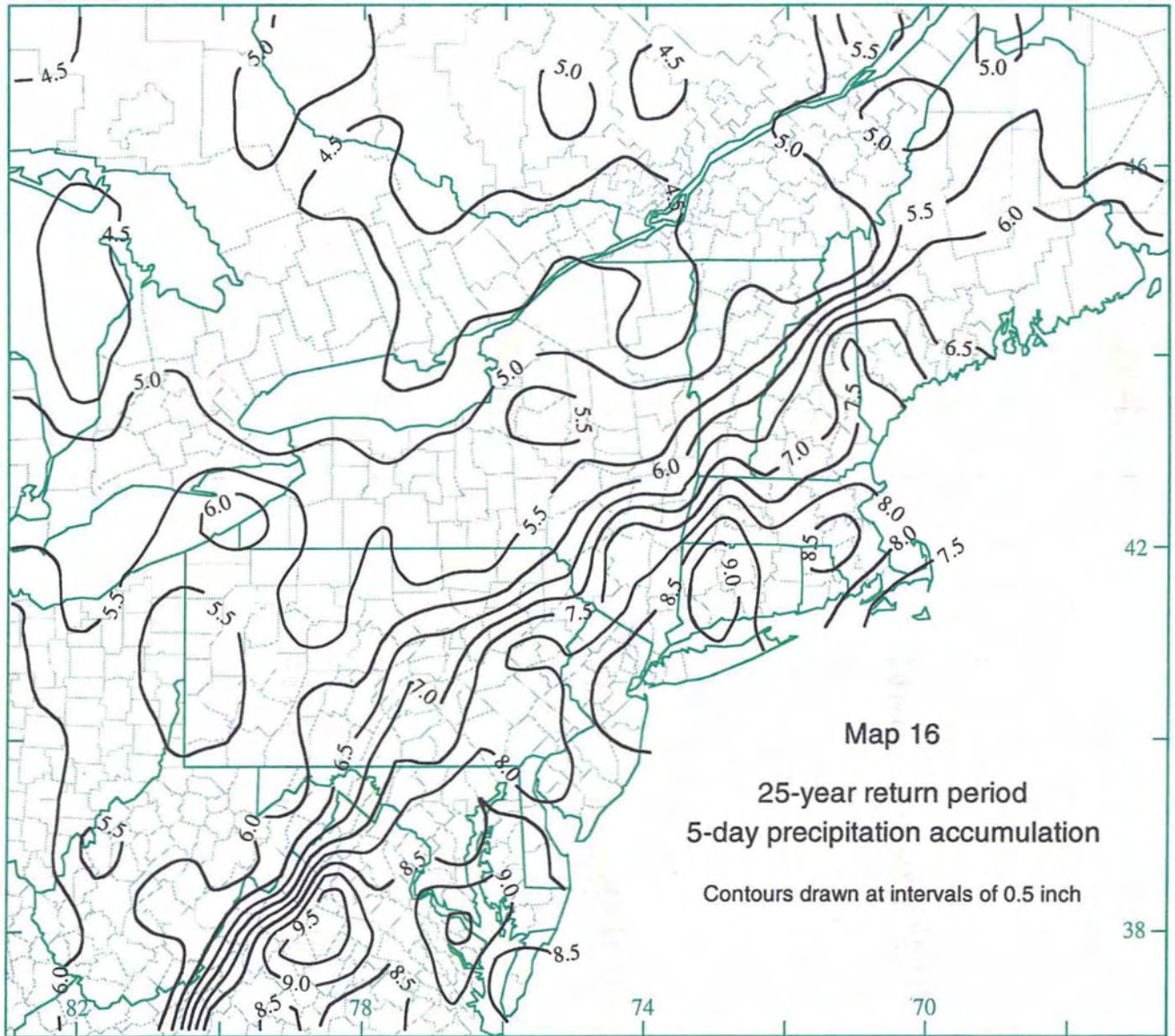


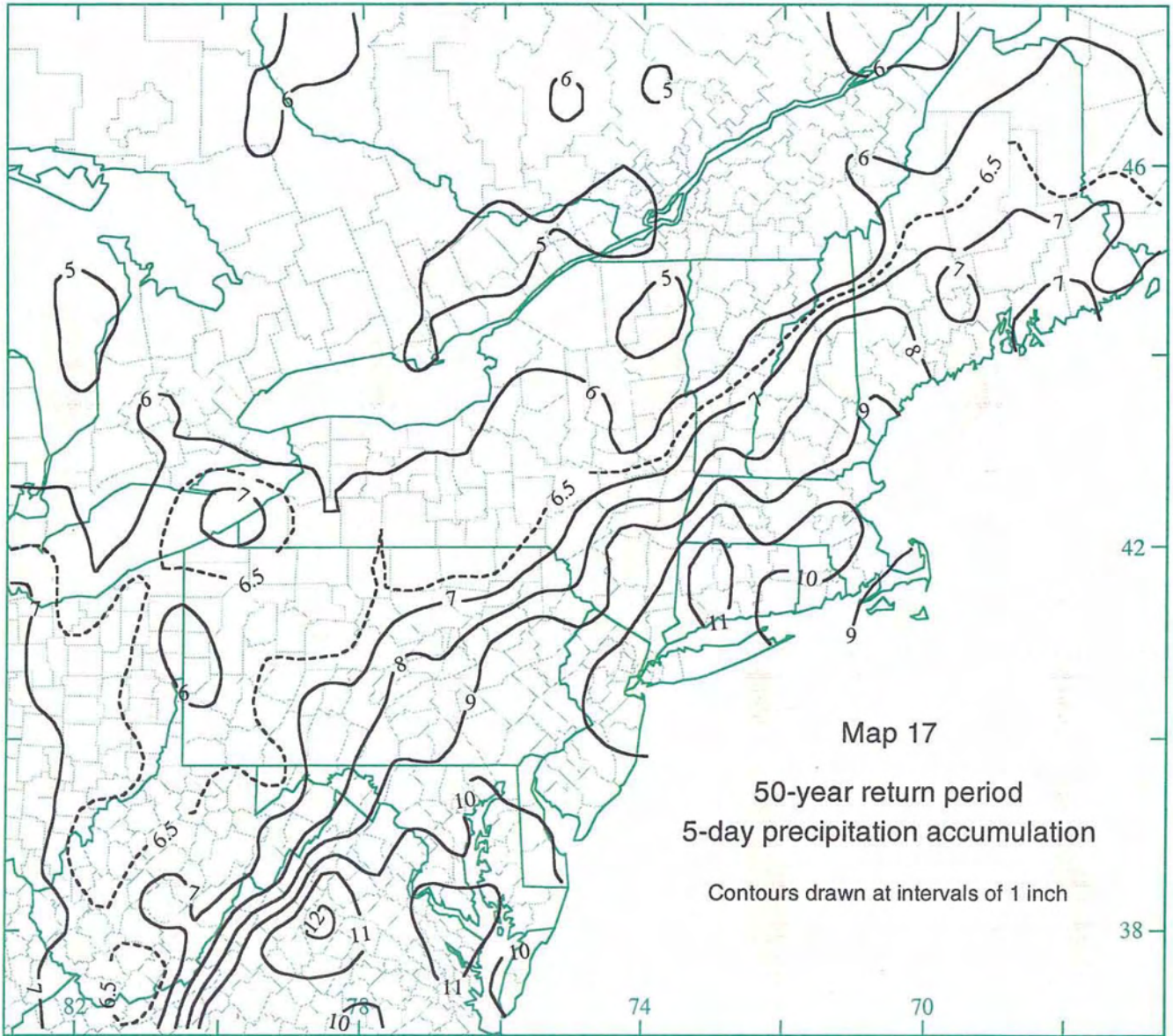


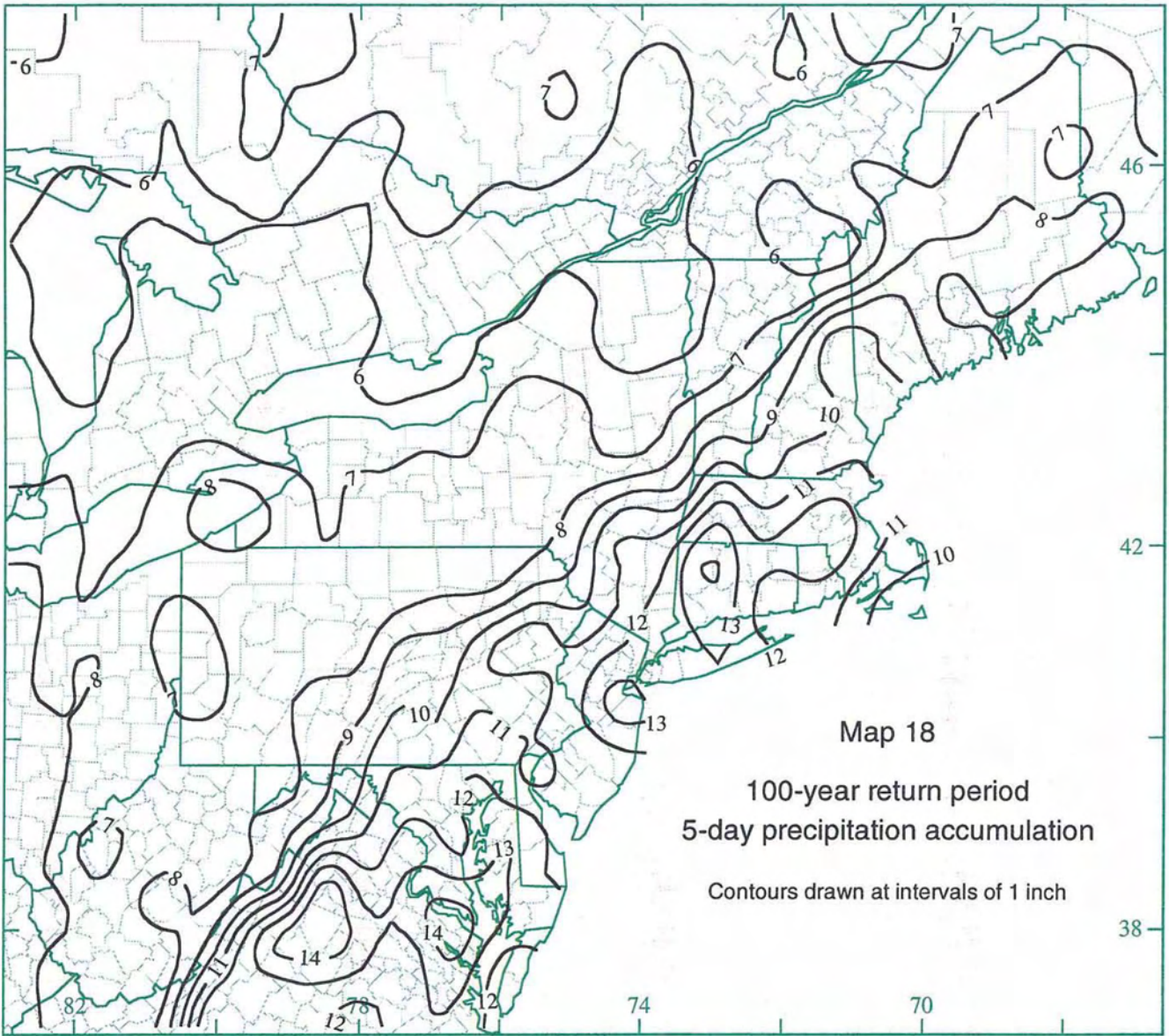


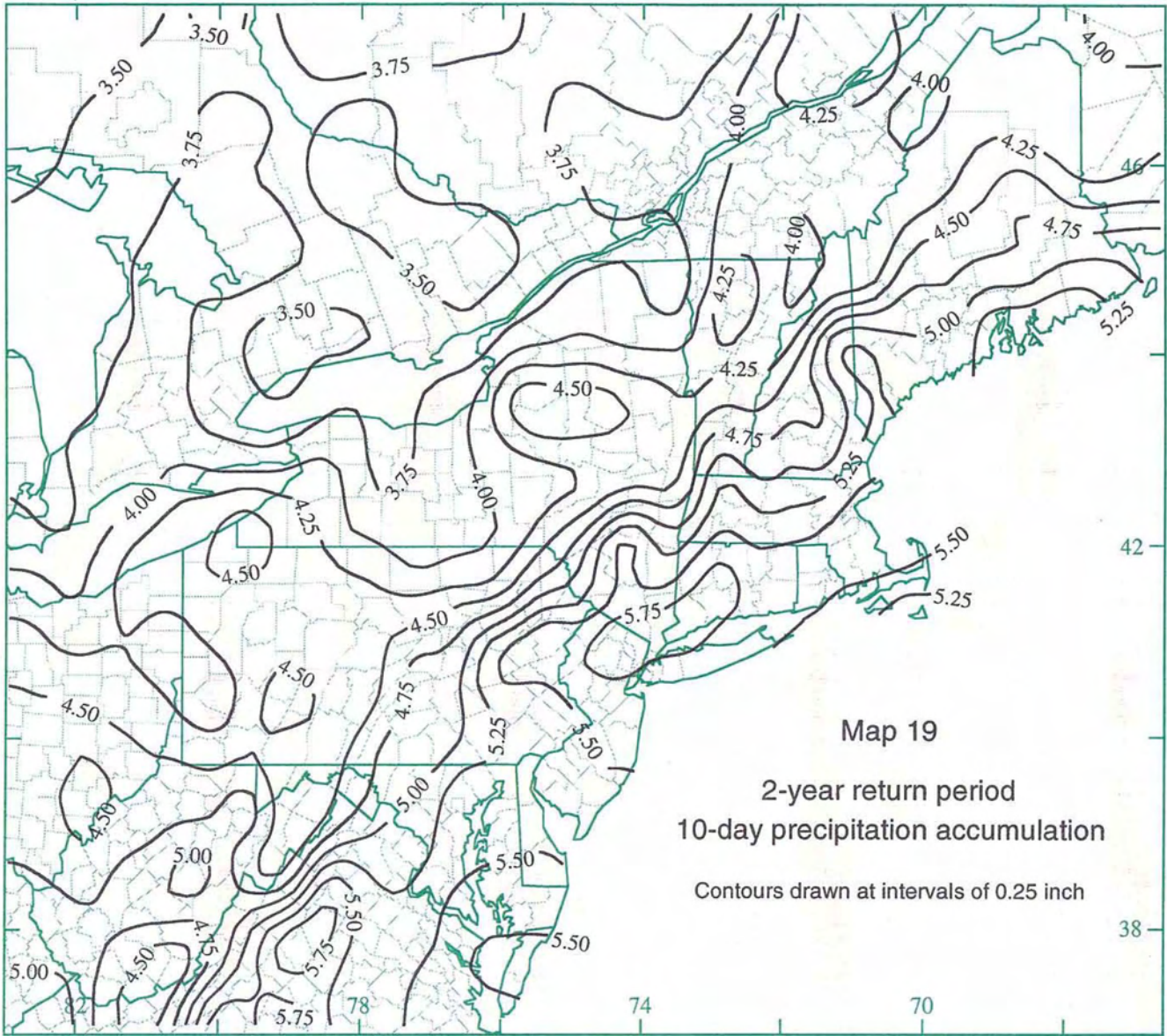


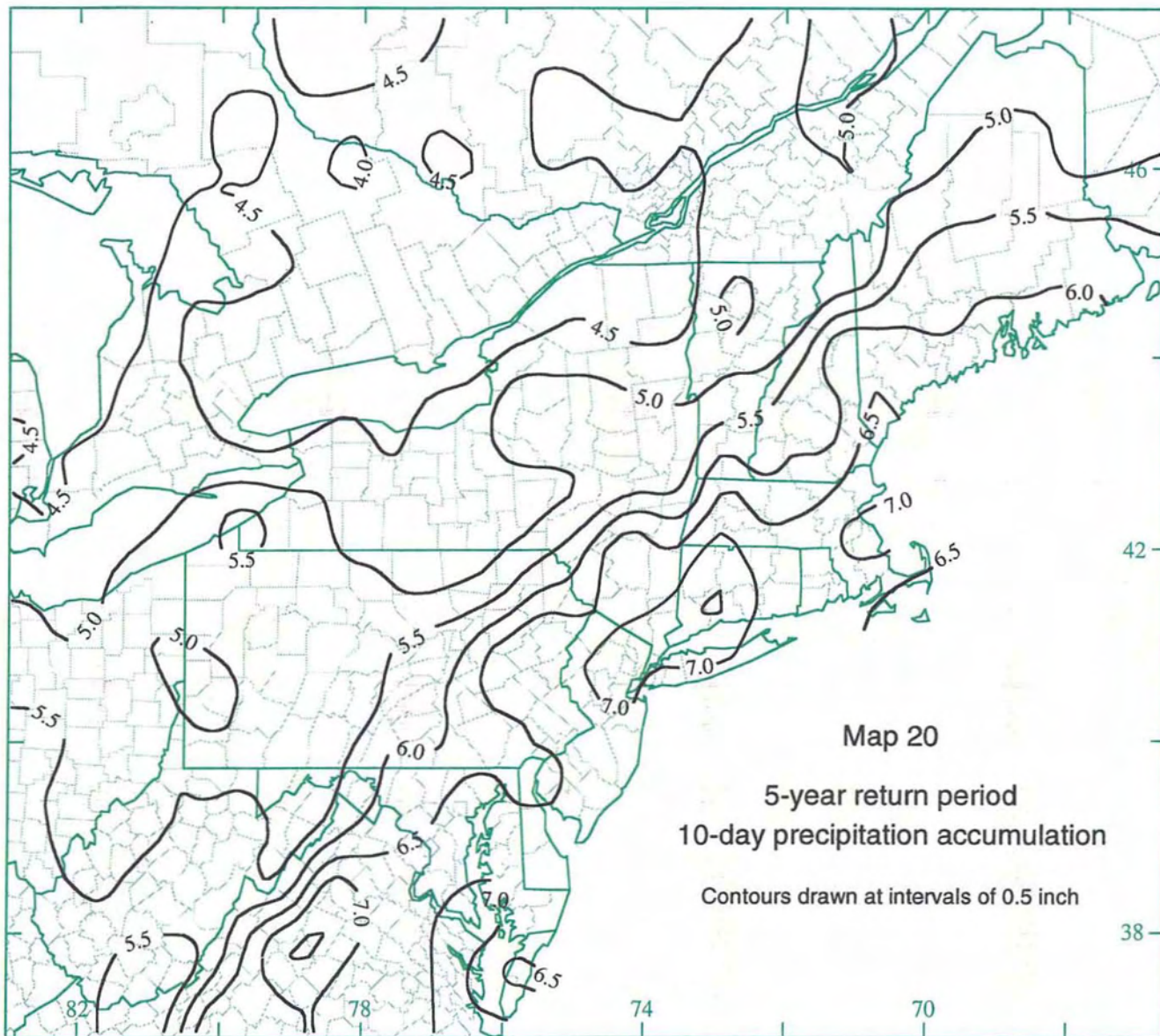


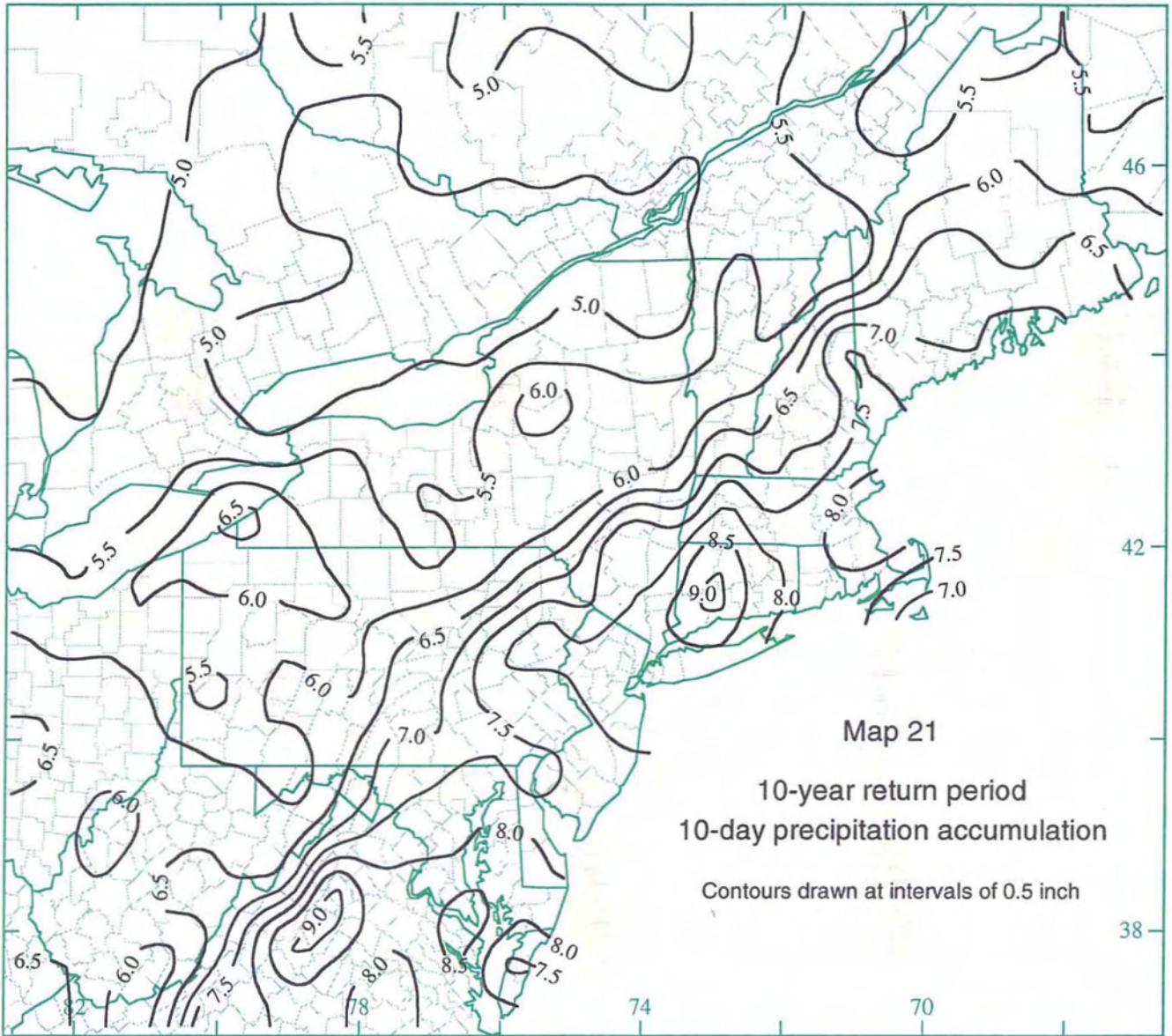


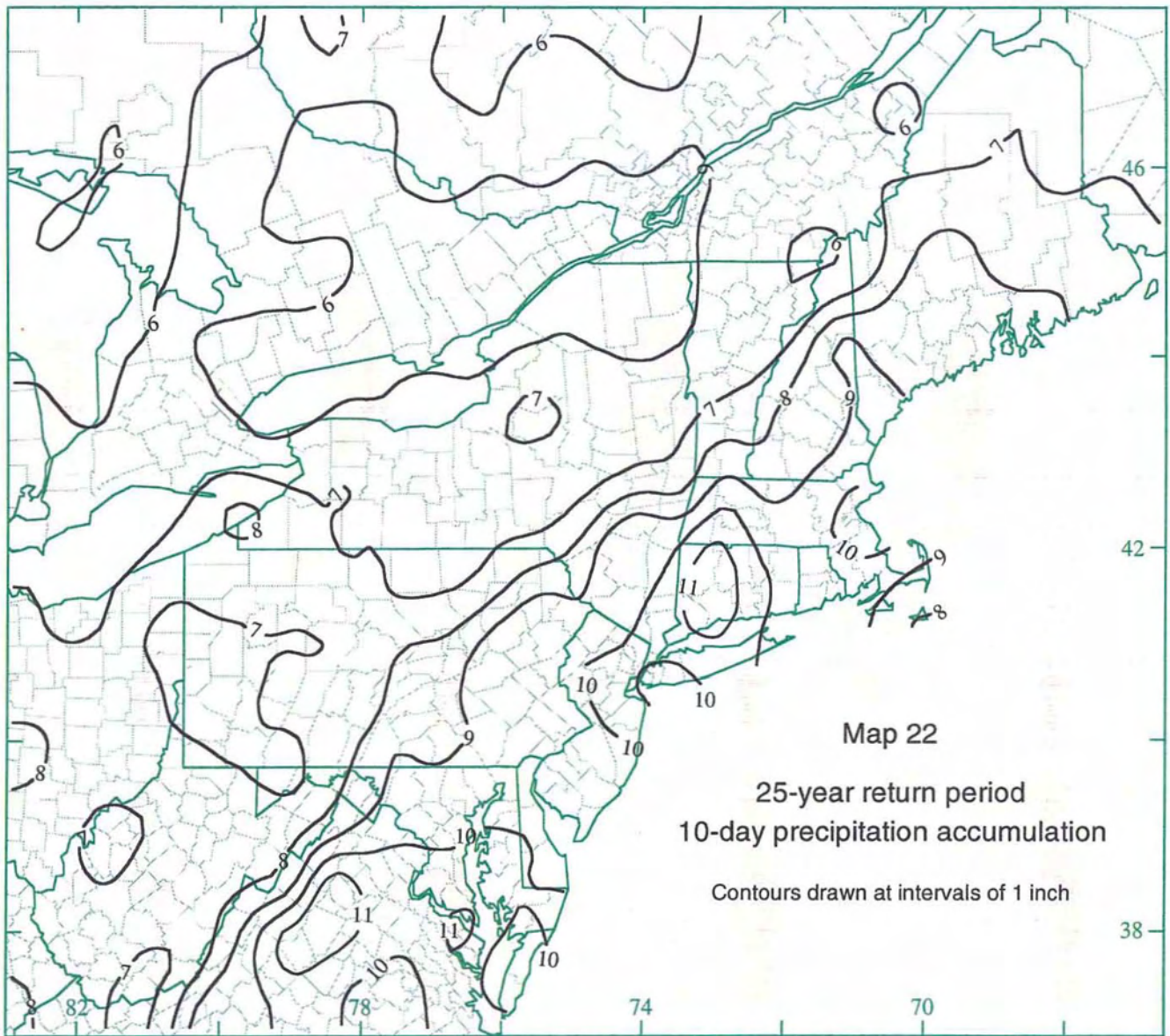


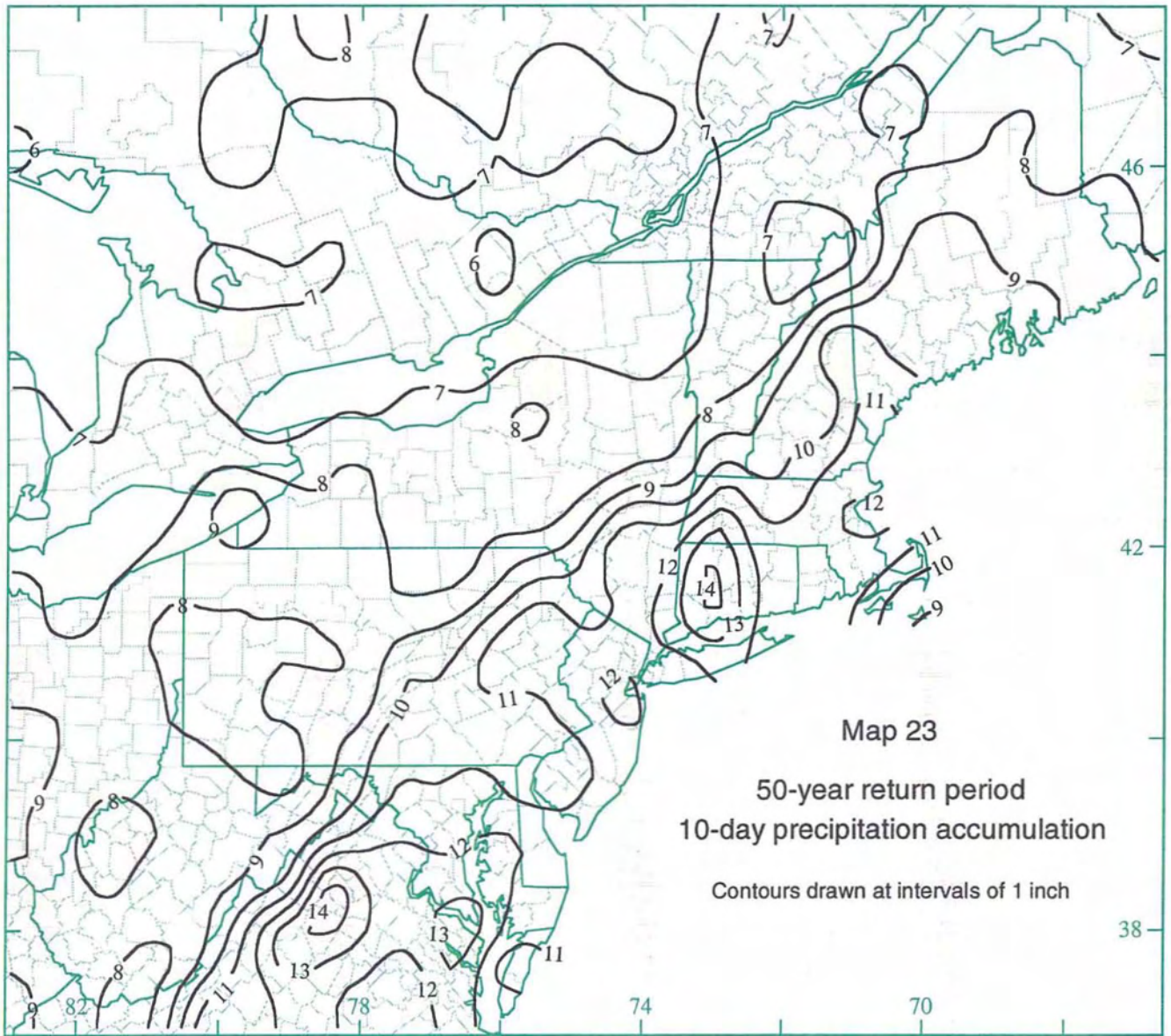


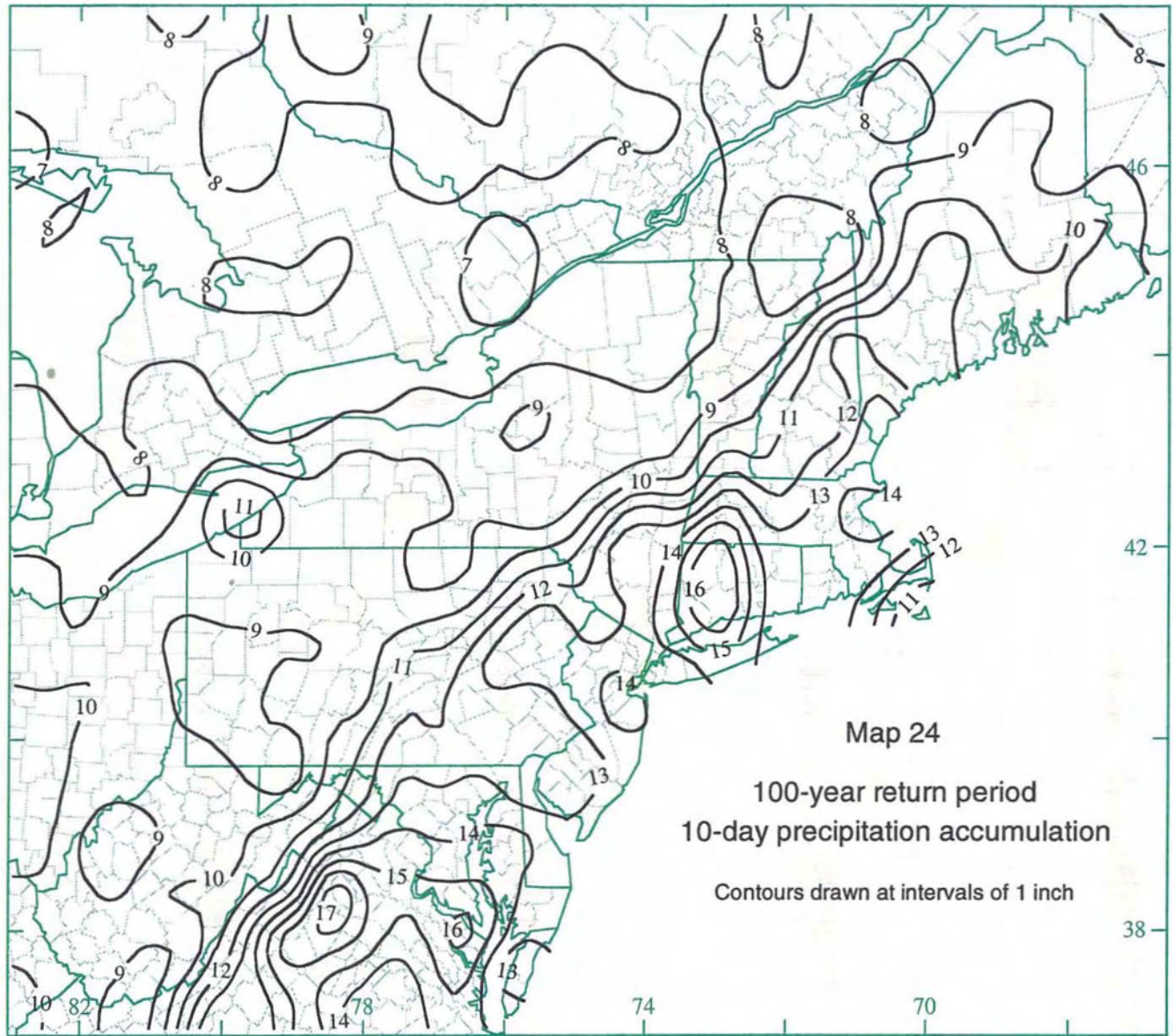












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