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Largest Rivers in the United States

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(Rev. May 1990)

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This fact sheet shows the location and ranking of the 20 largest rivers in the United States. It is common knowledge that the Mississippi is the largest U.S. river, but what is the rank of other major U.S. rivers? Rivers are considered large on the basis of one or more of three characteristics: total length from source to mouth, area of basin (watershed) drained by the stream, and average rate of flow (discharge) at the mouth. The alphabetical list on the back of this sheet shows these characteristics of 32 rivers so as to include the 20 largest rivers in each of the three categories. Among the 32 rivers, 16 are tributary to other rivers on the list; the remaining rivers discharge directly into oceans, seas, gulfs, or bays.

As dynamic parts of our environment, rivers and their characteristics vary in space and time in response to climatic changes and to man's activities . The causes include seasonal and annual changes in precipitation and temperature, cycles of erosion and deposition (especially during floods), diversions of water (for irrigation, power, and other purposes), and the construction of public works—dams, levees, locks, and canals. For example, combinations of these effects, but principally diversions, have reduced the average flow of the Colorado River near its mouth from about 22,000 cubic feet per second (ft^3/s) for the period 1903-34 to less than 4,000 ft^3/s during the period 1951-80. However, the annual flow in 1984 averaged 17,500 ft^3/s, a consequence of record-breaking precipitation on the river basin. A flow of 1,000 ft^3/s is equal to 646 million gallons per day, 724,000 acre-feet per year, or 28.3 cubic meters per second. (One acre-foot is the volume of water that would cover 1 acre to a depth of 1 foot.)

River lengths or river-length data are affected not only by some of the natural and artificial causes noted in the preceding paragraph, but also by the precision of various techniques of measurement, by the scale of available maps or aerial photographs, and by somewhat arbitrary decisions. For example, the length may be considered to be the distance from the mouth to the most distant headwater source (irrespective of stream name) or from the mouth to the headwaters of the stream commonly identified as the source stream. The names of some rivers, such as the Mississippi River and the Rio Grande, are unchanged from source to mouth. In contrast, the name of the source of the Mobile River—Tickanetley Creek—changes five times before becoming Mobile River 45 miles north of Mobile Bay. The lengths of meandering rivers, such as the Mississippi River south of Cairo, Ill., undergo significant changes in length from time to time because of a natural or excavated cutoff (a channel severing a narrow strip of land, thus bypassing a large bend in a river) that reduces river length and therefore navigation time. For example, between 1766 and 1885, the length of the Mississippi River from Cairo, Ill., to New Orleans, La., was reduced by 218 miles because of 18 cutoffs (Elliott, 1932, page 59).

Reference cited--Elliott, D.O. (U.S. Mississippi River Commission), 1932, *The improvement of the lower Mississippi River for flood control and navigation*: Vicksburg, Miss., U.S. Waterways Experiment Station, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 345 pages.

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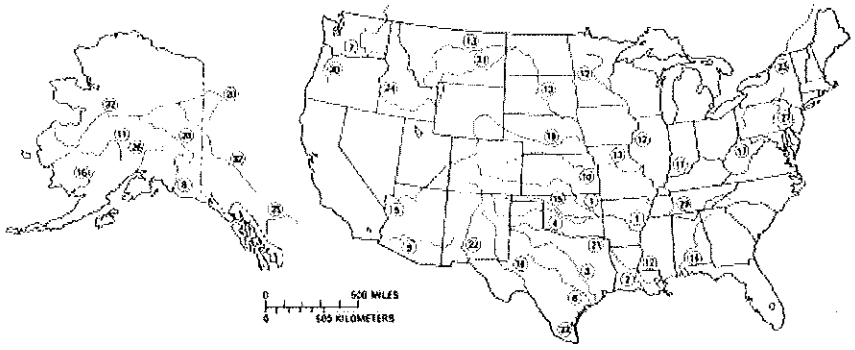

Maps showing location of largest rivers in the United States.

Circled numbers correspond to numbers in first column of table of rivers on other side of this sheet.

LARGEST RIVER IN THE UNITED STATES, IN DISCHARGE, DRAINAGE AREA, OR LENGTH

[Of the 32 rivers listed here the 20 largest in three categories-discharge, drainage basin, and length—are ranked from 1 parentheses.

Abbreviations: ft^3/s=cubic feet per second; mi^2=square miles. All data have been rounded to no more than three signi Stream discharge and drainage area-mainly U .S . Geological Survey reports and files; length-publications and files of Army Corps of Engineers, U .S . Environmental Protection Agency, and the Tennessee Valley Authority; data for the St from Canadian Maps," Canada Department of Energy, Mines and Resources, 1972. Period of record for most rivers is 1 provisional, and subject to revision . Compiled by J .C . Kammerer, U .S . Geological Survey]

NOTE: Rank from 1 to 20 in each category is shown in parentheses.

Number on map	River	Location of mouth	Average discharge of mouth ($1,000 ft^3/s$)		Drainage area ($1,000 mi^2$)		Length from source to mouth (miles)		
1	Arkansas	Arkansas	41.0	(16)	161	(9)	1,469	(6)	East Fork Colorado (Lake Cou
2	Atchfalaya (excluding about 167,000 ft^3/s diverted from Mississippi River).[1]	Louisiana	58.0	(11)	95.1	(11)	1,420	(8)	Tierra Bla New Mexi (Curry Co
3	Brazos	Texas	(*)	- - -	45.6	(19)	1,280	(11)	Blackwate New Mexi (Curry Co
4	Canadian	Oklahoma	(*)	- - -	46.9	(18)	906	(16)	Canadian Colorado (Las Anim
5	Colorado	Mexico	(*)	- - -	246 (U.S.-Mexico)	(7)	1,450	(7)	Colorado I Colorado (Grand Cc
6	Colorado (of Texas)	Texas	(*)	- - -	42.3	- - -	862	(18)	Colorado I (of Texas) Texas (Dawson
7	Columbia	Oregon-Washington	265	(4)	258 (U.S.-Canada)	(6)	1,249	(12)	Columbia British Col Canada.
8	Copper	Alaska	59	(10)	24.4	- - -	286	- - -	Copper Ri Terminus Copper Gl Alaska.
9	Gila	Arizona	(*)	- - -	58.2 (U.S.-Mexico)	(16)	649	- - -	Middle Fo New Mexi (Catron C
10	Kansas	Kansas	(*)	- - -	59.5	(15)	743	- - -	Arikaree F Colorado (Elbert Co
11	Kuskokwim	Alaska	67	(9)	48	(17)	724	- - -	South For River at te unnamed Alaska.
12	Mississippi (excluding Atchafalaya—Red River basin[1,2]	Louisiana	593	(1)	1,150 (U.S.-Canada)	(1)	2,340	(2)	Mississipp Minnesota (Clearwat
13	Missouri[2]	Missouri	76.2	(6)	529 (U.S.-Canada)	(2)	2,540	(1)	Red Rock Montana (Beaverhe
14	Mobile	Alabama	67.2	(8)	44.6	- - -	774	(20)	Tickar Georgia (Gilm

15	North Canadian	Oklahoma	(*)	- - -	17.6	- - -	800	(19)	Corrumpa New Mexi (Union Co
16	Nushagak	Alaska	36	(20)	13.4	- - -	285	- - -	Nushagak Alaska.
17	Ohio	Illinois-Kentucky	281	(3)	203	(8)	1,310	(9)	Allegheny Pennsylva (Potter Cc
18	Pecos	Texas	(*)	- - -	44.3	- - -	926	(15)	Pecos Rive New Mexi (Mora Cou
19	Platte	Nebraska	(*)	- - -	84.9	(13)	990	(14)	Grizzly Cr Colorado (Jackson (
20	Porcupine	Alaska	23	- - -	45.1 (U.S.-Canada)	(20)	569	- - -	Porcupine Yukon Ter Canada.
21	Red[1]	Louisiana	56.0	(13)	93.2	(12)	1,290	(10)	Tierra Bla New Mexi (Curry Co
22	Rio Grande	Mexico-Texas	(*)	- - -	336 (U.S.-Mexico)	(4)	1,900	(4)	Rio Grand Colorado (San Juan
23	St. Lawrence (—Great Lakes)	Canada	348	(2)	396 (U.S.-Canada)	(3)	1,900	(4)	North Rive Minnesota (Lake Cou
24	Snake	Washington	56.9	(12)	108	(10)	1,040	(13)	Snake Riv Wyoming (Teton Co
25	Stikine	Alaska	56	(13)	20 (U.S.-Canada)	- - -	379	- - -	Stikine Ri British Col Canada.
26	Susitna	Alaska	51	(15)	20	- - -	313	- - -	Susitna Ri at termin Susitna Gl Alaska.
27	Susquehanna	Maryland	38.2	(18)	27.2	- - -	447	- - -	Hayden C New York (Otsego C
28	Tanana	Alaska	41	(16)	44.5	- - -	659	- - -	Nabes at termin Nabesna (Alaska
29	Tennessee	Kentucky	68.0	(7)	40.9	- - -	886	(17)	Courthous North Car (Transylv
30	Willamette	Oregon	37.4	(19)	11.4	- - -	309	- - -	Middle Fo Willamett Oregon (Douglas (
31	Yellowstone	North Dakota	(*)	- - -	70.0	(14)	692	- - -	North Folk Yellowsto Wyoming (Park Cou
32	Yukon	Alaska	225	(5)	328 (U.S.-Canada)	(5)	1,980	(3)	McNeil Riv Yukon Ter Canada.

*Less than 15,000 ft^3/s and therefore not among the largest rivers in terms of discharge.

[1]In east-central Louisiana 50 miles northwest of Baton Rouge, the Red River flows into the Atchafalaya River, a distribu discharge of the Atchafalaya River, as shown in the table above, includes the entire discharge of the Red River, but exclu Atchafalaya River from the Mississippi River. Thus, the respective discharges represent drainage from corresponding drai

[2]The total discharge from the entire 1,250,00-mi^2 Mississippi River system, including the Atchafalaya, Red, and Missou cubic feet per second. For the Mississippi River system as a whole, the longest continuous river channel is from the Missc Montana to the mouth of the Missouri to the Gulf of Mexico, a combined length of about 3,710 miles.