



The skill of seasonal ensemble low flow forecasts for four different hydrological models

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Abstract

This paper investigates the skill of 90 day low flow forecasts using two conceptual hydrological models and two data-driven models based on Artificial Neural Networks (ANNs) for the Moselle River. One data-driven model, ANN-Indicator (ANN-I), requires historical inputs on precipitation (P), potential evapotranspiration (PET), groundwater (G) and observed discharge (Q), whereas the other data-driven model, ANN-Ensemble (ANN-E), and the two conceptual models, HBV and GR4J, use forecasted meteorological inputs (P and PET), whereby we employ ensemble seasonal meteorological forecasts. We compared low flow forecasts without any meteorological forecasts as input (ANN-I) and five different cases of seasonal meteorological forcing: (1) ensemble P and PET forecasts; (2) ensemble P forecasts and observed climate mean PET; (3) observed climate mean P and ensemble PET forecasts; (4) observed climate mean P and PET and (5) zero P and ensemble PET forecasts as input for the other three models (GR4J, HBV and ANN-E). The ensemble P and PET forecasts, each consisting of 40 members, reveal the forecast ranges due to the model inputs. The five cases are compared for a lead time of 90 days based on model output ranges, whereas the four models are compared based on their skill of low flow forecasts for varying lead times up to 90 days. Before forecasting, the hydrological models are calibrated and validated for a period of 30 and 20 years respectively. The smallest difference between calibration and validation performance is found for HBV, whereas the largest difference is found for ANN-E. From the results, it appears that all models are prone to over-predict low flows using ensemble seasonal meteorological forcing. The largest range for 90 day low flow forecasts is found for the GR4J model when using ensemble seasonal meteorological forecasts as input. GR4J, HBV and ANN-E under-predicted 90 day ahead low flows in the very dry year 2003 without precipitation data, whereas ANN-I predicted the magnitude of the low flows better than the other three models. The results of the comparison of forecast skills with varying lead times show that GR4J is less skilful than ANN-E and HBV. Furthermore, the hit rate of ANN-E is higher than the two conceptual models for

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most lead times. However, ANN-I is not successful in distinguishing between low flow events and non-low flow events. Overall, the uncertainty from ensemble P forecasts has a larger effect on seasonal low flow forecasts than the uncertainty from ensemble PET forecasts and initial model conditions.

1 Introduction

Rivers in Western Europe usually experience low flows in late summer and high flows in winter. These two extreme discharge phenomena can lead to serious problems. For example, high flow events are quick and can put human life at risk, whereas streamflow droughts (i.e. low flows) develop slowly and can affect a large area. Consequently, the economic loss during low flow periods can be much bigger than during floods (Pushpalatha et al., 2011; Shukla et al., 2012). In the River Rhine, severe problems for freshwater supply, water quality, power production and river navigation were experienced during the dry summers of 1976, 1985 and 2003. Therefore, forecasting seasonal low flows (Towler et al., 2013; Coley and Waylen, 2006; Li et al., 2008) and understanding low flow indicators (Vidal et al., 2010; Fundel et al., 2013; Demirel et al., 2013a; Wang et al., 2011; Saadat et al., 2013; Nicolle et al., 2013) have both societal and scientific value. The seasonal forecast of water flows is therefore listed as one of the priority topics in EU's Horizon 2020 research program (EU, 2013). Further, there is an increasing interest to incorporate seasonal flow forecasts in decision support systems for river navigation and power plant operation during low flow periods. We are interested in forecasting low flows with a lead time of 90 days, and in presenting the effect of ensemble meteorological forecasts for four hydrological models.

Generally, two approaches are used in seasonal hydrological forecasting. The first one is a statistical approach, making use of data-driven models based on relationships between river discharge and hydroclimatological indicators (Wang et al., 2011; Van Ogtrop et al., 2011). The second one is a dynamic approach running a hydrological model with forecasted climate input. The first approach is often preferred in regions

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where significant correlations between river discharge and climatic indicators exist, such as sea surface temperature anomalies (Chowdhury and Sharma, 2009), AMO – Atlantic Multi-decadal Oscillation (Ganguli and Reddy, 2013; Giuntoli et al., 2013), PDO – Pacific Decadal Oscillation (Soukup et al., 2009) and warm and cold phases of the ENSO – El Niño Southern Oscillation – index (Chiew et al., 2003; Kalra et al., 2013; Tootle and Piechota, 2004). Kahya and Dracup (1993) identified the lagged response of regional streamflow to the warm phase of ENSO in the south-eastern United States. In the Rhine basin, no teleconnections have been found between climatic indices, e.g. NAO and ENSO, and river discharges (Rutten et al., 2008; Bierkens and van Beek, 2009). However, Demirel et al. (2013a) found significant correlations between hydrological low flow indicators and observed low flows. They also identified appropriate lags and temporal resolutions of low flow indicators (e.g. precipitation, potential evapotranspiration, groundwater storage, lake levels and snow storage) to build data-driven models.

The second approach is the dynamic seasonal forecasting approach which has long been explored (Wang et al., 2011; Van Dijk et al., 2013; Gobena and Gan, 2010; Fundel et al., 2013; Shukla et al., 2013; Pokhrel et al., 2013), which has led to the development of the current ensemble streamflow prediction system (ESP) used by different national climate services like the National Weather Service in the United States. The seasonal hydrologic prediction systems are most popular in regions with a high risk of extreme discharge situations like hydrological droughts (Robertson et al., 2013). Well-known examples are the NOAA Climate Prediction Centre’s seasonal drought forecasting system (available at <http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov>), the University of Washington’s Surface Water Monitoring system (Wood and Lettenmaier, 2006), Princeton University’s drought forecast system (available at <http://hydrology.princeton.edu/forecast>) and University of Utrecht’s global monthly hydrological forecast system (Yossef et al., 2012). These models provide indications about the hydrologic conditions and their evolution across the modelled domain using available weather ensemble inputs (Gobena and Gan, 2010; Yossef et al., 2012). Many studies have investigated the seasonal

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5 predictability of low flows in different rivers such as the Thames and different other
rivers in the UK (Bell et al., 2013; Wedgbrow et al., 2002; Wedgbrow et al., 2005),
the Shihmen and Tsengwen Rivers in Taiwan (Kuo et al., 2010), the River Jhelum in
Pakistan (Archer and Fowler, 2008), more than 200 rivers in France (Sauquet et al.,
2008; Giuntoli et al., 2013), five semi-arid areas in South Western Queensland, Aus-
10 tralia (Van Ogtrop et al., 2011), five rivers including Limpopo basin and the Blue Nile in
Africa (Dutra et al., 2013; Winsemius et al., 2014), the Bogotá River in Colombia (Fe-
lipe and Nelson, 2009), the Ohio in the eastern US (Wood et al., 2002; Luo et al., 2007;
Li et al., 2009), the North Platte in Colorado, US (Soukup et al., 2009), large rivers in
15 the US (Schubert et al., 2007; Shukla and Lettenmaier, 2011) and the Thur River in
the north-eastern part of Switzerland (Fundel et al., 2013). The common result of the
above mentioned studies is that the skill of the seasonal forecasts made with global
and regional hydrological models is reasonable for lead times of 1–3 months (Shukla
and Lettenmaier, 2011; Wood et al., 2002) and these forecasting systems are all prone
20 to large uncertainties as their forecast skills mainly depend on the knowledge of ini-
tial hydrologic conditions and weather information during the forecast period (Shukla
et al., 2012; Yossef et al., 2013; Li et al., 2009; Doblaz-Reyes et al., 2009). In a re-
cent study, Yossef et al. (2013) used a global monthly hydrological model to analyse
the relative contributions of initial conditions and meteorological forcing to the skill of
25 seasonal streamflow forecasts. They included 78 stations in large basins in the world
including the River Rhine for forecasts with lead times up to 6 months. They found that
improvements in seasonal hydrological forecasts in the Rhine depend on better mete-
orological forecasts, which underlines the importance of meteorological forcing quality
particularly for forecasts beyond lead times of 1–2 months.

Most of the previous River Rhine studies use only one hydrological model, e.g. PRE-
VAH (Fundel et al., 2013) or PCR-GLOBWB (Yossef et al., 2013), to assess the value
of ensemble meteorological forcing, whereas in this study, we compare four hydrolog-
ical models with different structures varying from data-driven to conceptual models.
The two objectives of this study are to contrast data-driven and conceptual modelling

approaches and to assess the effect of ensemble seasonal forecasted precipitation and potential evapotranspiration on low flow forecast quality and skill scores. By comparing four models with different model structures we address the issue of model structure uncertainty, whereas the latter objective reflects the benefit of ensemble seasonal forecasts. Moreover, the effect of initial model conditions is partly addressed using climate mean data in one of the cases.

The analysis complements recent efforts to analyse the effects of ensemble weather forecasts on low flow forecasts with a lead time of 10 days using two conceptual models (Demirel et al., 2013b), by studying the effects of seasonal ensemble weather forecasts on 90 day low flow forecasts using not only conceptual models but also data-driven models.

The outline of the paper is as follows. The study area and data are presented in Sect. 2. Section 3 describes the model structures, their calibration and validation setups and the methods employed to estimate the different attributes of the forecast quality. The results are presented in Sect. 4 and discussed in Sect. 5, and the conclusions are summarised in Sect. 6.

2 Study area and data

2.1 Study area

The study area is the Moselle River basin, the largest sub-basin of the Rhine River basin. The Moselle River has a length of 545 km. The river basin has a surface area of approximately 27 262 km². The altitude in the basin varies from 59 to 1326 m, with a mean altitude of 340 m (Demirel et al., 2013a). Approximately 410 mm ($\sim 130 \text{ m}^3 \text{ s}^{-1}$) discharge is annually generated in the Moselle basin (Demirel et al., 2013b). The outlet discharge at Cochem varies from $14 \text{ m}^3 \text{ s}^{-1}$ in dry summers to a maximum of $4000 \text{ m}^3 \text{ s}^{-1}$ during winter floods.

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2.2 Data

2.2.1 Observed data

Observed daily data on precipitation (P) and potential evapotranspiration (PET) have been obtained from the German Federal Institute of Hydrology (BfG) in Koblenz, Germany (Table 1). PET is estimated using the Penman–Wendling equation (ATV-DVWK, 2002) and both variables have been spatially averaged by BfG over 26 Moselle sub-basins using areal weights. Observed daily discharge (Q) data at Cochem (station #6336050) are provided by the Global Runoff Data Centre (GRDC), Koblenz. The daily observed data (P , PET and Q) are available for the period 1951–2006.

2.2.2 Ensemble seasonal meteorological forecast data

The ensemble seasonal meteorological forecast data, comprising 40 members, are obtained from the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF) seasonal forecasting archive and retrieval system, i.e. MARS system 3 (ECMWF, 2012). This dataset contains regular $0.25^\circ \times 0.25^\circ$ latitude-longitude grids and each ensemble member is computed for a lead time of 184 days using perturbed initial conditions and model physics (Table 2). We estimated the PET forecasts using the Penman–Wendling equation requiring forecasted surface solar radiation and temperature at 2 m above the surface, and the altitude of the sub-basin (ATV-DVWK, 2002). The mean altitudes of the 26 sub-basins have been provided by BfG in Koblenz, Germany. The PET estimation is consistent with the observed PET estimation carried out by BfG (ATV-DVWK, 2002). The grid-based P and PET ensemble forecast data are firstly interpolated over 26 Moselle sub-basins using areal weights. These sub-basin averaged data are then aggregated to the Moselle basin level.

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3 Methodology

3.1 Overview of model structures and forecast scheme

The four hydrological models (GR4J, HBV, ANN-E and ANN-I) are briefly described in Sects. 3.1.1–3.1.3. Figure 1 shows the simplified model structures. The calibration and validation of the models is described in Sect. 3.1.4. Five cases with different combinations of ensemble meteorological forecast input and climate mean input are introduced in Sect. 3.1.5.

3.1.1 GR4J

The GR4J model (Génie Rural à 4 paramètres Journalier) is used as it has a parsimonious structure with only four parameters. The model has been tested over hundreds of basins worldwide, with a broad range of climatic conditions from tropical to temperate and semi-arid basins (Perrin et al., 2003). GR4J is a conceptual model and the required model inputs are daily time series of P and PET (Table 3). The four parameters in GR4J represent the maximum capacity of the production store (X_1), the groundwater exchange coefficient (X_2), the one day ahead capacity of the routing store (X_3) and the time base of the unit hydrograph (X_4). All four parameters (Fig. 1a) are used to calibrate the model. The upper and lower limits of the parameters are selected based on previous works (Perrin et al., 2003; Pushpalatha et al., 2011; Tian et al., 2014).

3.1.2 HBV

The HBV conceptual model (Hydrologiska Byråns Vattenbalansavdelning) was developed by the Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute (SMHI) in the early 1970's (Lindström et al., 1997). The HBV model consists of four subroutines: a precipitation and snow accumulation and melt routine, a soil moisture accounting routine and two runoff generation routines. The required input data are daily P and PET. The snow routine and daily temperature data are not used in this study as the Moselle basin is a

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rain-fed basin. Eight parameters (see Fig. 1b) in the HBV model are calibrated (Engelard et al., 2010; Van den Tillaart et al., 2013; Tian et al., 2014). The ranges of the eight parameters for calibration are selected based on previous works (Booij, 2005; Eberle, 2005; Tian et al., 2014).

3.1.3 ANN-E and ANN-I

An Artificial Neural Network (ANN) is a data-driven model inspired by functional units (neurons) of the human brain (Elshorbagy et al., 2010). A neural network is a universal approximator capable of learning the patterns and relation between outputs and inputs from historical data and applying it for extrapolation (Govindaraju and Rao, 2000). A three-layer feed-forward neural network (FNNs) is the most widely preferred model architecture for prediction and forecasting of hydrological variables (Adamowski et al., 2012; Shamseldin, 1997; Kalra et al., 2013). Each of these three layers has an important role in processing the information. The first layer receives the inputs and multiplies them with a weight (adds a bias if necessary) before delivering them to each of the hidden neurons in the next layer (Gaume and Gosset, 2003). The weights determine the strength of the connections. The number of nodes in this layer corresponds to the number of inputs. The second layer, the hidden layer, consists of an activation function (also known as transfer function) which non-linearly maps the input data to output target values. In other words, this layer is the learning element of the network which simulates the relationship between inputs and outputs of the model. The third layer, the output layer, gathers the processed data from the hidden layer and delivers the final output of the network.

A hidden neuron is the processing element with n inputs ($x_1, x_2, x_3, \dots, x_n$), and one output y using Eq. (1).

$$y = f(x_1, x_2, x_3, \dots, x_n) = \text{logsig} \left[\left(\sum_{i=1}^n x_i w_i \right) + b \right] \quad (1)$$

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cases for ANN-E, GR4J and HBV models are compared: (1) ensemble P and PET forecasts, (2) ensemble P forecasts and observed climate mean PET, (3) observed climate mean P and ensemble PET forecasts, (4) observed climate mean P and PET, (5) zero P and ensemble PET forecasts (Table 4).

Cases 1–4 are the different possible combinations of ensemble and climate mean meteorological forcing. Case 5 is analysed to determine to which extent the precipitation forecast in a very dry year (2003) is important for seasonal low flow forecasts.

3.2 Forecast skill scores

Three probabilistic forecast skill scores (Brier Skill Score, reliability diagram, hit and false alarm rates) and one deterministic forecast skill score (Mean Forecast Score) are used to analyse the results of low flow forecasts with lead times of 1–90 days. Forecasts for each day in the test period (2002–2005) are used to estimate these scores. The Mean Forecast Score focusing on low flows is introduced in this study, whereas the other three scores have been often used in meteorology (WMO, 2012) and flood hydrology (Velázquez et al., 2010; Renner et al., 2009; Thirel et al., 2008). For the three models, i.e. GR4J, HBV and ANN-E, the forecast probability for each forecast day is estimated as the ratio of the number of ensemble members non-exceeding the preselected thresholds (here Q_{75}) and the total number of ensemble members (i.e. 40 members) for that forecast day. The ANN-I model issues a single deterministic forecast, therefore, the probability for each forecast day is either zero or one.

3.2.1 Brier Skill Score (BSS)

The Brier Skill Score (BSS) (Wilks, 1995) is often used in hydrology to evaluate the quality of probabilistic forecasts (Devineni et al., 2008; Hartmann et al., 2002; Jaun and Ahrens, 2009; Roulin, 2007; Towler et al., 2013).

$$\text{Brier Skill Score} : 1 - \frac{BS_{\text{forecast}}}{BS_{\text{climatology}}} \quad (5)$$

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where the BS_{forecast} is the Brier Score (BS) for the forecast, defined as:

$$\text{Brier Score} : \frac{1}{N} \sum_{t=1}^N (F_t - O_t)^2 \quad (6)$$

where F_t refers to the forecast probability, O_t refers to the observed probability ($O_t = 1$ if the observed flow is below the low flow threshold, 0 otherwise), and N is the sample size. $BS_{\text{climatology}}$ is the BS for the climatology, which is also calculated from Eq. (6) for every year using climatological probabilities. BSS values range from minus infinity to 1 (perfect forecast). Negative values indicate that the forecast is less accurate than the climatology and positive values indicate more skill compared to the climatology.

3.2.2 Reliability diagram

The reliability diagram is used to evaluate the performance of probabilistic forecasts of selected events, i.e. low flows. A reliability diagram represents the observed relative frequency as a function of forecasted probability and the 1:1 diagonal shows the perfect reliability line (Velázquez et al., 2010; Olsson and Lindström, 2008). This comparison is important as reliability is one of the three properties of a hydrological forecast (WMO, 2012). A reliability diagram shows the portion of observed data inside preselected forecast intervals.

In this study, non-exceedence probabilities of 50, 75, 85, 95, and 99 % are chosen as thresholds to categorize the discharges from mean flows to extreme low flows. The forecasted probabilities are then divided into bins of probability categories; here, five bins (categories) are chosen 0–20, 20–40, 40–60, 60–80 and 80–100 %. The observed frequency for each day is chosen to be 1 if the observed discharge non-exceeds the threshold, or 0, if not.

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3.2.3 Hit and false alarm rates

We used hit and false alarm rates to assess the effect of ensembles on low flow forecasts for varying lead times. The hit and false alarm rates indicate respectively the proportion of events for which a correct warning was issued, and the proportion of non events for which a false warning was issued by the forecast model. These two simple rates can be easily calculated from contingency tables (Table 5) using Eqs. (7) and (8). These scores are often used for evaluating flood forecasts (Martina et al., 2006), however, they can also be used to estimate the utility of low flow forecasts as they indicate the models' ability to correctly forecast the occurrence or non-occurrence of preselected events (i.e. Q_{75} low flows). There are four cases in a contingency table as shown in

$$\text{hit rate} = \frac{\text{hits}}{(\text{hits} + \text{misses})} \quad (7)$$

$$\text{false alarm rate} = \frac{\text{false alarms}}{(\text{correct negatives} + \text{false alarms})}. \quad (8)$$

3.2.4 Mean Forecast Score (MFS)

The Mean Forecast Score (MFS) is a new skill score which can be derived from either probabilistic or deterministic forecasts. These probabilities are calculated only for the days that low flows occurred. Table 6 shows the low flow contingency table for calculating MFS. In this study we used a deterministic approach for calculating the observed frequency for all four models. However, a deterministic approach for calculating the forecast probability is used only for the ANN-I model. For the other three models, ensembles are used for estimating forecast probabilities.

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The score is calculated as below only for deterministic observed low flows (left column in Table 6).

$$\text{Mean Forecast Score} : \frac{1}{m} \sum_{j=1}^m F_j \quad (9)$$

where F_j is the forecast probability for the j th observed low flow day (i.e. $O_j \leq Q_{75}$) and m is the total number of low flow days. For instance, if 23 of the 40 ensemble forecast members indicate low flows for the j th low flow day then $F_j = 23/40$. It should be noted that this score is not limited to low flows as it has a flexible forecast probability definition which can be adapted to any type of discharges. MFS values range from zero to 1 (perfect forecast).

4 Results

4.1 Calibration and validation

Table 7 shows the parameter ranges and the best performing parameter sets of the four models. The GR4J and HBV models have both well-defined model structures; therefore, their calibration was more straightforward than the calibration of the ANN models. Calibration of the ANN models was done in two steps. First, the number of hidden neurons was determined by testing the performance of the ANN-E model with one, two and three hidden neurons.

Second, daily P , PET and Q are used as three inputs for the tested ANN-E model with one, two and three hidden neurons due to the fact that these inputs are comparable with the inputs of the GR4J and HBV models. Figure 2a shows that the performance of the ANN-E models does not improve with additional hidden neurons. Based on the performance in the validation period, one hidden neuron is selected. GR4J, HBV and ANN-I are also calibrated accordingly. Based on the results of the first step, ANN-I with

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one hidden neuron is calibrated for its long term averaged inputs. The results of the four models used in this study are presented in Fig. 2b.

The performances of GR4J and HBV are similar in the calibration period, whereas HBV performs better in the validation period (Fig. 2b). This is not surprising, since HBV has a more sophisticated model structure than GR4J. The performance of ANN-E and ANN-I is similar in both calibration and validation periods.

4.2 Effect of ensembles on low flow forecasts for 90 day lead time

The effect of ensemble P and PET on GR4J, HBV and ANN-E is presented as a range bounded by the lowest and highest forecast values in Fig. 3a and b. In these figures, there is no range for the ANN-I results as the model issues only one forecast using historical low flow indicators as input. The two years, i.e. 2002 and 2003, are carefully selected as they represent a relatively wet year and a very dry year respectively. Figure 3a shows that there are significant differences between the four model results. The 90 day ahead low flows in 2002 are mostly over-predicted by the ANN-E model, whereas GR4J and HBV over-predict low flows observed after August. The forecast results of ANN-I are considerably better than the results of the other three models. The over-prediction of low flows is more pronounced for GR4J than for the other three models. The over-prediction of low flows by ANN-E is mostly at the same level. This less sensitive behaviour of ANN-E to the forecasted ensemble inputs shows the effect of the logarithmic sigmoid transfer function on the results. Due to the nature of this algorithm, input is rescaled to a small interval $[0, 1]$ and the gradient of the sigmoid function at large values approximates zero (Wang et al., 2006). Further, ANN-E is also not sensitive to the initial model conditions updated on every forecast issue day. The less pronounced over-prediction of low flows by HBV compared to GR4J may indicate that the slow responding groundwater storage in HBV is less sensitive to different forecasted ensemble P and PET inputs (Demirel et al., 2013b).

The results for 2003 are slightly different than those for 2002. As can be seen from Fig. 3b the number of low flow days has increased in the dry year, i.e. 2003, and the

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low flows between August and November are not captured by any of the 40-ensemble forecasts using ANN-E. Moreover, ANN-I performed better in 2002 than in 2003. The most striking result in Fig. 3b is that the low flows observed in the period between April and May are not captured by any of the three models, i.e. GR4J, HBV and ANN-E. The 90 day low flows between October and November are better forecasted by GR4J and HBV than the ANN-E model.

For the purpose of determining to which extent ensemble P and PET inputs and different initial conditions affect 90 day low flow forecasts, we run the models with different input combinations such as ensemble P or PET and climate mean P or PET and zero precipitation. Figure 4a shows the forecasts using ensemble P and climate mean PET as input for three models. The picture is very similar to Fig. 3b as most of the observed low flows fall within the constructed forecast range by GR4J and HBV. The forecasts issued by GR4J are better than those issued by the other two models. However, the range of forecasts using GR4J is larger than for the other models showing the sensitivity of the model for different precipitation inputs. It is obvious that most of the range in all forecasts is caused by uncertainties originating from ensemble precipitation input. The results of the fourth model, ANN-I, are the same as in Fig. 3b and therefore, they are not presented again in the remaining figures.

Figure 4b shows the forecasts using climate mean P and ensemble PET as input for three models, i.e. GR4J, HBV and ANN-E. Interestingly, only GR4J could capture the 90 day low flows between July and November using climate mean P and ensemble PET showing the ability of the model to handle the excessive rainfall. None of the low flows were captured by HBV, whereas very few low flow events were captured by ANN-E (Fig. 4b).

Figure 5 shows the forecasts using climate mean P and PET as input for three models. The results are presented by point values without a range since only one deterministic forecast is issued. There are significant differences in the results of the three models. For instance, all 90 day ahead low flows in 2003 are over-predicted by HBV, whereas the over-prediction of low flows is less pronounced for ANN-E. It is remarkable

probabilistic skill scores for ANN-I were calculated only for a lead time of 90 days and are not shown in Fig. 6. The mean forecast score and hit rate are equal to one, confirming the good deterministic ANN-I forecast results in Fig. 3a and b. However, the ANN-I model is less skilful than climatology (i.e. BSS < 0) for non-low flow events. Similarly, the false alarm rate of ANN-I is equal to one, showing that the model predicts only low flows and misses all non-low flow events. This is from the fact that ANN-I is solely developed for forecasting on low flow days. In other words, only observed low flows and corresponding input data with appropriate lags and temporal resolutions were used for the ANN-I model during calibration and validation.

Figure 7 compares the reliability of probabilistic 90 day low flows forecasts below different thresholds (i.e. Q_{75} , Q_{90} and Q_{95}) using ensemble P and PET as input for three models. The figure shows that the Q_{75} and Q_{90} low flow forecasts issued by the HBV model are more reliable compared to the other models. Moreover, all three models under-predict most of the forecast intervals. It appears from Fig. 7c that very critical low flows (i.e. Q_{99}) are under-predicted by the GR4J model.

5 Discussion

To compare data-driven and conceptual modelling approaches and to evaluate the effects of seasonal meteorological forecasts on low flow forecasts, 40-member ensembles of ECMWF seasonal meteorological forecasts were used as input for four low flow forecast models. Different input combinations were compared to distinguish between the effects of ensemble P and PET and model initial conditions on 90 day low flow forecasts. The models could reasonably forecast low flows when ensemble P was introduced into the models. This result is in line with that of Shukla and Lettenmaier (2011) who found that seasonal meteorological forecasts have a greater influence than initial model conditions on the seasonal hydrological forecast skills. Two other related studies also showed that the effect of a large spread in ensemble seasonal meteorological forecasts is larger than the effect of initial conditions on hydrological forecasts with lead

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times longer than 1–2 months (Li et al., 2009; Yossef et al., 2013). The encouraging results of low flow forecasts using ensemble seasonal precipitation forecasts for the hydrological models confirm the utility of seasonal meteorological forcing for low flow forecasts. Shukla et al. (2012) also found useful forecast skills for both runoff and soil moisture forecasting at seasonal lead times using the medium range weather forecasts.

In this study, we also assessed the effects of ensemble P and PET on the skill scores of low flow forecasts with varying lead times up to 90 days. In general, the four skill scores show similar results. Not surprisingly, all models under-predicted low flows without precipitation information (zero P). The most evident two patterns in these scores are that first, the forecast skill drops sharply until a lead time of 30 days and second, the skill of probabilistic low flow forecasts issued by GR4J is the lowest, whereas the skill of forecasts issued by ANN-E is the highest compared to the other two models. Further, our study showed that data-driven models can be good alternatives to conceptual models for issuing seasonal low flow forecasts. Despite the successful results of ANN-Indicator, there are still limitations to the applicability of this model: first, the model is area dependent as its input and temporal scales were chosen for the Moselle sub-basin. Second, the model is limited to low flow forecasts as the model is calibrated and validated for observed low flows.

The methodology to develop ANN models for seasonal forecasts as described in this study can be generalized to any other river basin in the world. Particularly the ANN-Indicator type of model can be very useful for regions where seasonal climate forecast data are not available. Moreover, a similar approach consisting five cases of input combination can be applied to other geographical areas and other regime types for evaluating the effect of model inputs on the forecasts. The objective function based on the hybrid mean absolute error can be applied to all other low flow calibration problems, data-driven models in particular.

6 Conclusions

Four hydrological models have been compared regarding their performance in the calibration, validation and forecast periods, and the effect of seasonal meteorological forecasts on the skill of low flow forecasts has been assessed for varying lead times. The comparison of four different models helped us contrast data-driven and conceptual models in low flow forecasts, whereas running the models with different input combinations, e.g. climate mean precipitation and ensemble potential evapotranspiration, helped us identify which input source led to the largest range in the forecasts. A new hybrid low flow objective function, comprising the mean absolute error of low flows and the mean absolute error of inverse discharges, is used for comparing low flow simulations, whereas the skill of the probabilistic seasonal low flow forecasts has been evaluated based on the ensemble forecast range, Brier Skill Score, reliability, hit/false alarm rates and Mean Forecast Score. The latter skill score (MFS) focusing on low flows is firstly introduced in this study. In general our results showed that;

- Based on the results of the calibration and validation, one hidden neuron in ANNs was found to be enough for seasonal forecasts as additional hidden neurons did not increase the simulation performance. Interestingly, the data-driven models, i.e. ANN-E and ANN-I, performed similarly in the calibration and validation periods showing the utility of identified indicators in simulating low flows by ANN-I. The difference between calibration and validation performances was smallest for the HBV model, i.e. the most sophisticated model used in this study.
- Based on the results of the comparison of different model inputs, the largest range for 90 day low flow forecasts is found for the GR4J model when using ensemble seasonal meteorological forecasts as input. Moreover, the uncertainty arising from ensemble precipitation has a larger effect on seasonal low flow forecasts than the effects of ensemble potential evapotranspiration. All models are prone to over-predict low flows using ensemble seasonal meteorological forecasts. However, the precipitation forecasts in the forecast period are crucial for improving the low

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flow forecasts. As expected, all three models, i.e. GR4J, HBV and ANN-E under-predicted 90 day ahead low flows in 2003 without rainfall data.

- Based on the results of the comparison of forecast skills with varying lead times, the low flow forecasts using GR4J are less skilful than the other three models. However, the false alarm rate of GR4J is also the lowest indicating the ability of the model of forecasting non-occurrence of low flow days. The low flow forecasts issued by HBV are more reliable compared to the other models. The ANN-I model can predict the magnitude of the low flows better than the other three models. However, ANN-I is not successful in distinguishing between low flow events and non-low flow events for a lead time of 90 days. The hit rate of ANN-E is higher than that of the two conceptual models used in this study. Overall, the ANN-E and HBV models are the best performing two of the three models using ensemble P and PET.

Further work should examine the effect of model parameters and initial conditions on the seasonal low flow forecasts as the values of the maximum soil moisture and percolation related parameters of conceptual models can result in over- or under-prediction of low flows. It is noteworthy to mention that the two data-driven models developed in this study, i.e. ANN-E and ANN-I, can be applied to other large river basins elsewhere in the world. Surprisingly, ANN-E and HBV showed a similar skill for seasonal forecasts although we expected that the two conceptual models, GR4J and HBV, would show similar results up to a lead time of 90 days. The skill score results of ANN-I may seem contradictory, but they show that ANN-I is useless to predict whether a low flow (as defined, below a threshold) will occur or not. For that purpose, one of the other three models will be required. Though, if one of the other models predicts that a low flow below a threshold will occur, ANN-I can be used to predict the magnitude of low flows, better than the other three models.

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Table 1. Overview of observed data used.

Variable	Name	Number of stations/ sub-basins	Period	Time step (days)	Spatial resolution	Source
Q	Discharge	1	1951–2006	1	Point	GRDC
P	Precipitation	26	1951–2006	1	Basin average	BfG
PET	Potential evapotranspiration	26	1951–2006	1	Basin average	BfG
h	Mean altitude	26	–	–	Basin average	BfG

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Table 2. Overview of ensemble seasonal meteorological forecast data.

Data	Spatial resolution	Ensemble size	Period	Time step (days)	Lead time (days)
Forecasted P	$0.25^\circ \times 0.25^\circ$	39 + 1 control	2002–2005	1	1–90
Forecasted PET	$0.25^\circ \times 0.25^\circ$	39 + 1 control	2002–2005	1	1–90

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Table 3. Model descriptions. PET is potential evapotranspiration, P is precipitation, G is ground-water and Q is discharge.

Model type		Input	Temporal resolution of input	Lag between forecast issue day and final day of temporal averaging (days)	Model time step	Model lead time (days)
GR4J	Data-driven	P : Ensemble PET: Ensemble Q : State update	Daily P Daily PET	P : 0 PET: 0 Q : 1	Daily	1 to 90
HBV		P : Ensemble PET: Ensemble Q : State update	Daily P Daily PET	P : 0 PET: 0 Q : 1	Daily	1 to 90
ANN-E		P : Ensemble PET: Ensemble Q : State update	Daily P Daily PET Daily Q	P : 0 PET: 0 Q : 1	Daily	1 to 90
	ANN-I	P : Observed PET: Observed G : Observed Q : State update	110-day mean P 180-day mean PET 90-day mean G	P : 0 PET: 210 G : 210	Daily	90

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Table 4. Details of the five input cases.

Case	Precipitation	Potential evapotranspiration
1	Ensemble forecast	Ensemble forecast
2	Ensemble forecast	Climate mean
3	Climate mean	Ensemble forecast
4	Climate mean	Climate mean
5	Zero	Ensemble forecast

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Table 5. Contingency table for the assessment of Q_{75} forecasts.

	Observed	Not observed
Forecasted	<i>hit</i> : the event forecasted to occur and did occur	<i>false alarm</i> : event forecasted to occur, but did not occur
Not forecasted	<i>miss</i> : the event forecasted not to occur, but did occur	<i>correct negative</i> : event forecasted not to occur and did not occur

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Table 6. Low flow contingency table for the assessment of forecasts.

		Observed low flows	
		Deterministic	Probabilistic
Forecasted low flows	Deterministic	$O_j = 1$ (Low flow observed)	$O_j =$ Observed frequency based on long term climate (e.g. 34/50 years indicates low flow for day j)
		$F_j = 1$ (Low flow forecasted if more than half of the ensemble members indicate low flows) otherwise 0	$F_j = 1$ or 0
	Probabilistic	$O_j = 1$	$O_j =$ Observed frequency based on long term climate
	Probabilistic	$F_j =$ Forecast frequency based on 40 ensemble members (e.g. 23/40 members indicate low flows for day j)	$F_j =$ Forecast frequency based on 40 ensemble members



Table 7. Parameter ranges and calibrated values of the pre-selected four models.

Parameter	Unit	Range	Calibrated value	Description
GR4J model				
X1	[mm]	10–2000	461.4	Capacity of the production store
X2	[mm]	–8 to +6	–0.3	Groundwater exchange coefficient
X3	[mm]	10–500	80.8	One day ahead capacity of the routing store
X4	[d]	0–4	2.2	Time base of the unit hydrograph
HBV model				
FC	[mm]	200–800	285.1	Maximum soil moisture capacity
LP	[–]	0.1–1	0.7	Soil moisture threshold for reduction of evapotranspiration
BETA	[–]	1–6	2.2	Shape coefficient
CFLUX	[mm d ⁻¹]	0.1–1	1.0	Maximum capillary flow from upper response box to soil moisture zone
ALFA	[–]	0.1–3	0.4	Measure for non-linearity of low flow in quick runoff reservoir
KF	[d ⁻¹]	0.005–0.5	0.01	Recession coefficient for quick flow reservoir
KS	[d ⁻¹]	0.0005–0.5	0.01	Recession coefficient for base flow reservoir
PERC	[mm d ⁻¹]	0.3–7	0.6	Maximum flow from upper to lower response box
ANN-E model				
W1	[–]	–10 to +10	–2.3	Weight of connection between 1st input node and hidden neuron
W2	[–]	–10 to +10	0.03	Weight of connection between 2nd input node and hidden neuron
W3	[–]	–10 to +10	–0.02	Weight of connection between 3rd input node and hidden neuron
W4	[–]	–10 to +10	3.7	Weight of connection between 4th input node and hidden neuron
B1	[–]	–10 to +10	0.02	Bias value in hidden layer
B2	[–]	–10 to +10	1.1	Bias value in output layer
ANN-I model				
W1	[–]	–10 to +10	0.4	Weight of connection between 1st input node and hidden neuron
W2	[–]	–10 to +10	0.9	Weight of connection between 2nd input node and hidden neuron
W3	[–]	–10 to +10	0.9	Weight of connection between 3rd input node and hidden neuron
W4	[–]	–10 to +10	0.6	Weight of connection between 4th input node and hidden neuron
B1	[–]	–10 to +10	0.001	Bias value in hidden layer
B2	[–]	–10 to +10	0.3	Bias value in output layer

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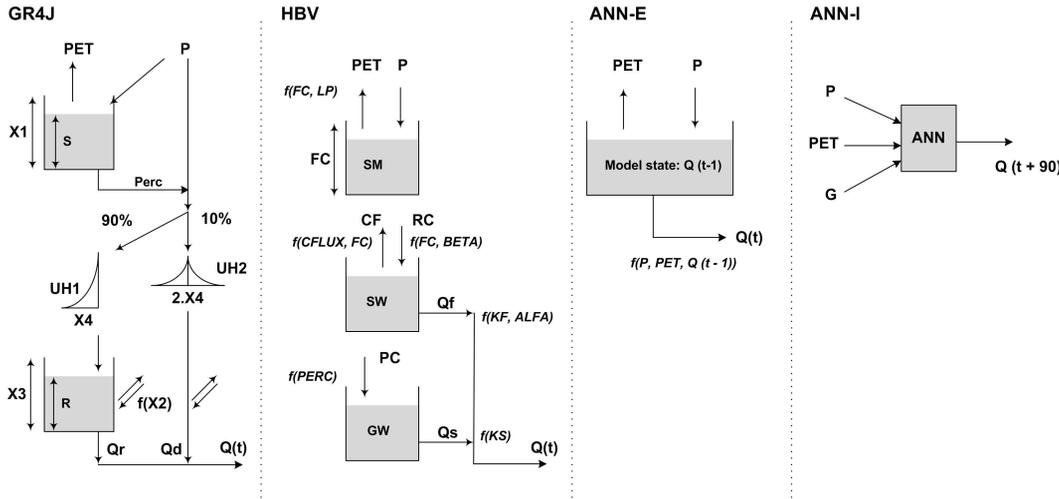


Figure 1. Schematisation of the four models. PET is potential evapotranspiration, P is precipitation, G is groundwater, Q is discharge and t is the time (day).

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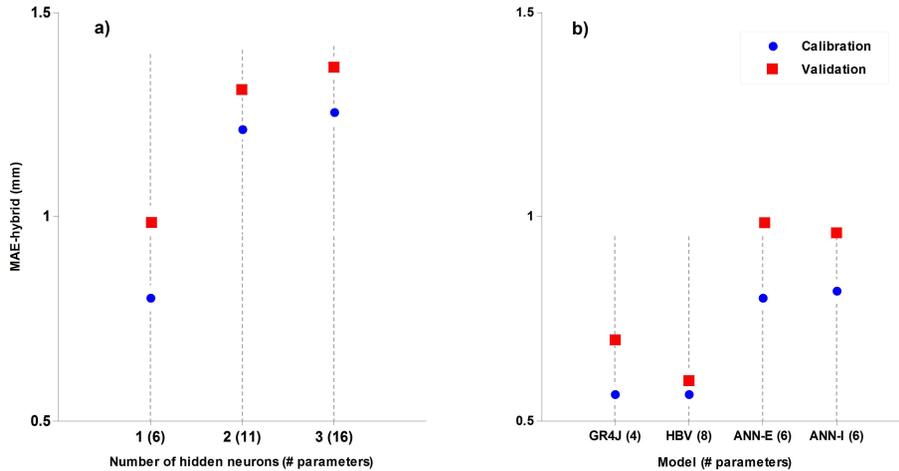


Figure 2. Calibration and validation results of **(a)** the ANN-E model with one, two and three hidden neurons and **(b)** the four models used in this study. The same calibration (1971–2001) and validation (1951–1970) periods are used for both plots.

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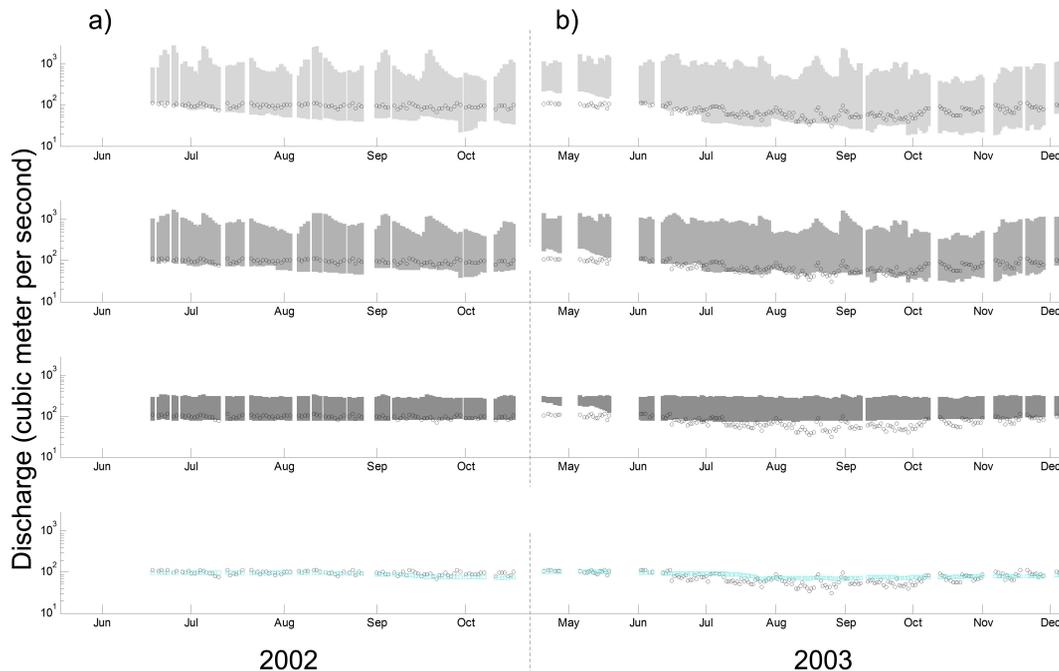


Figure 3. Range (shown as grey shade) of low flow forecasts in **(a)** 2002 (the wettest year of the test period) **(b)** 2003 (the driest year of the test period) for a lead time of 90 days using ensemble P and PET as input for GR4J, HBV and ANN-E models and using historical P , PET and G as input for the ANN-I model (case 1 – 2002 and 2003).

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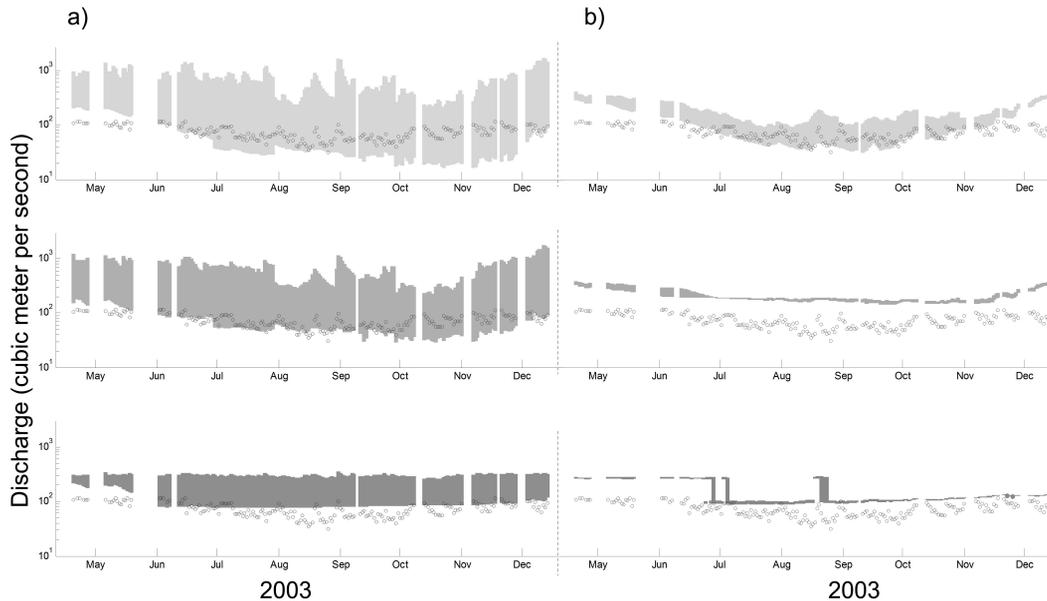


Figure 4. Range (shown as grey shade) of low flow forecasts in 2003 for a lead time of 90 days using **(a)** ensemble P and climate mean PET (case 2) **(b)** climate mean P and ensemble PET as input for GR4J, HBV and ANN-E models (case 3).

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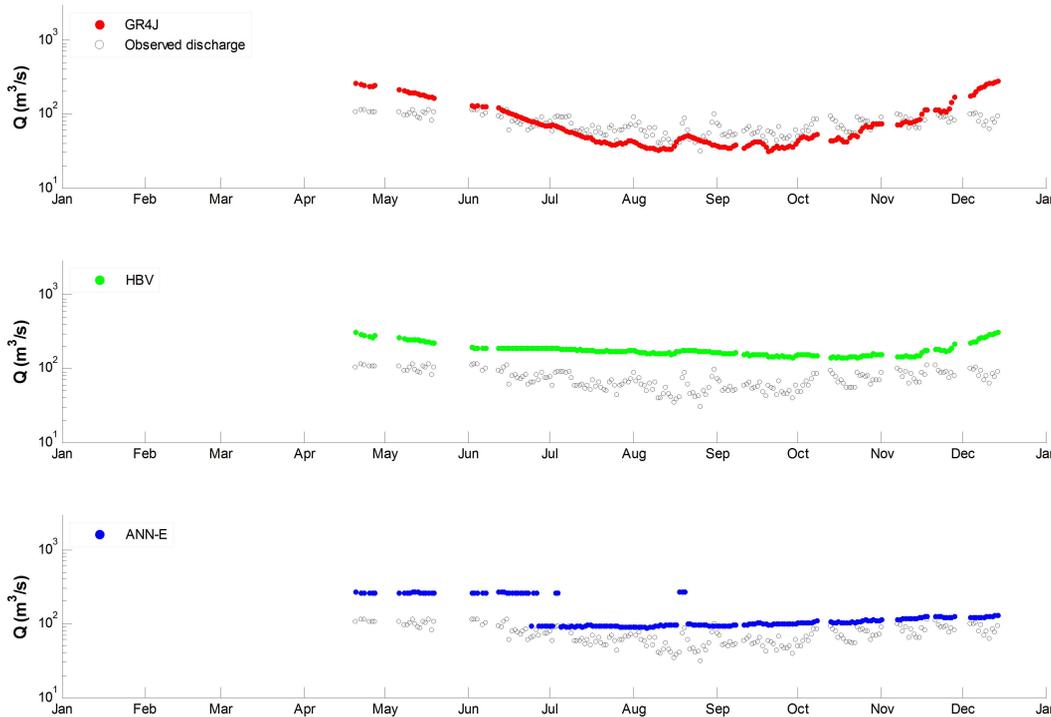


Figure 5. Low flow forecasts in 2003 for a lead time of 90 days using both climate mean P and PET as input for GR4J, HBV and ANN-E models (case 4).

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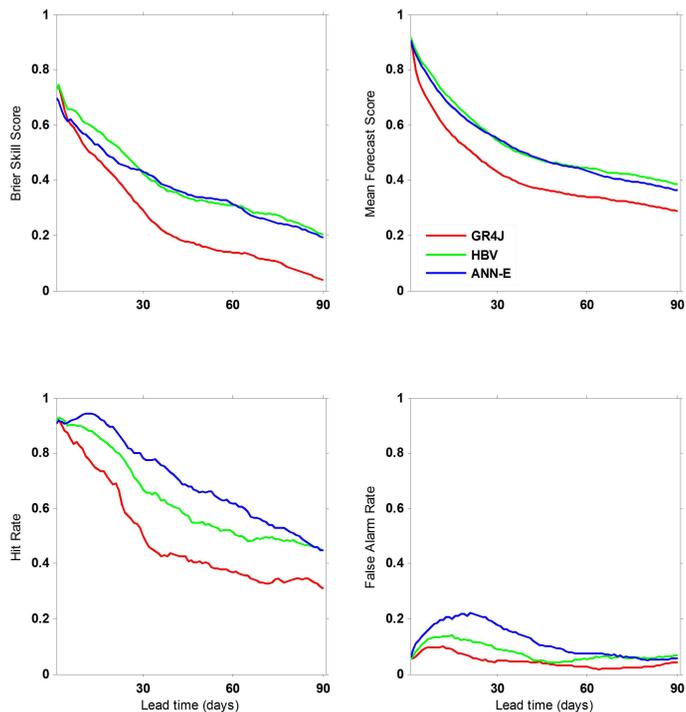


Figure 6. Skill scores for forecasting low flows at different lead times for three different hydrological models.

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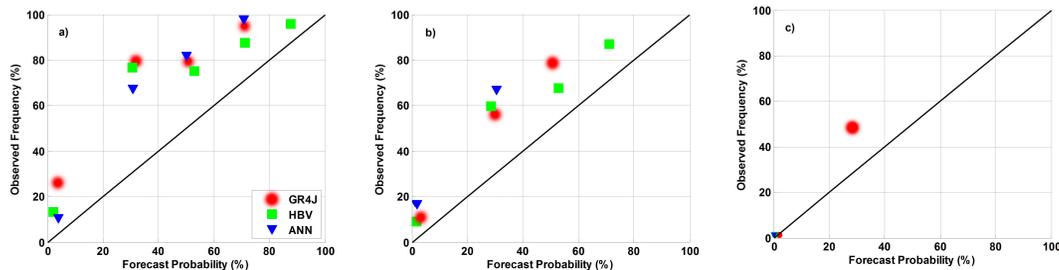


Figure 7. Reliability diagram for different low flow forecasts **(a)** low flows below Q_{75} threshold **(b)** low flows below Q_{90} threshold **(c)** low flows below Q_{99} threshold. The forecasts are issued for a lead time of 90 days for the test period 2002–2005 using ensemble P and PET as input for GR4J, HBV and ANN-E models.

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