

U.S. Geological Survey National Geospatial Program Lidar Guidelines and Base Specification

Version 13 – ILMF 2010

The U.S. Geological Survey National Geospatial Program (NGP) has cooperated in the collection of numerous lidar datasets across the nation for a wide array of applications. These collections have used a variety of specifications and required a diverse set of products, resulting in many incompatible datasets and making cross-project analysis extremely difficult. The need for a single base specification, defining minimum collection parameters and a consistent set of deliverables, is apparent.

Beginning in late 2009, an increase in the rate of lidar data collection due to American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) funding for The National Map makes it imperative that a single data specification be implemented to ensure consistency and improve data utility. Although the development of this specification was prompted by the ARRA stimulus funding, the specification is intended to remain durable beyond ARRA funded NGP projects.

The primary intent of this specification is to create consistency across all NGP funded lidar collections, in particular those undertaken in support of the National Elevation Dataset (NED). Unlike most other “lidar specs” which focus on the derived bare-earth DEM product, this specification places unprecedented emphasis on the handling of the source lidar point cloud data. This is to assure that the complete source dataset collected remains intact and viable to support the wide variety of non-DEM science and mapping applications that benefit from lidar technology. In the absence of other comprehensive specifications or standards, it is hoped that this specification will, to the highest degree practical, be adopted by other USGS programs and disciplines, and by other Federal agencies.

Adherence to these minimum specifications ensures that bare-earth Digital Elevation Models (DEMs) derived from lidar data is suitable for ingestion into the NED (National Elevation Dataset) at the 1/9 arc-second resolution, and can be resampled for use in the 1/3 and 1 arc-second NED resolutions. It also ensures that the point cloud source data are handled in a consistent manner by all data providers and delivered to the USGS in clearly defined formats. This allows straight-forward ingest into CLICK (Center for Lidar Information, Coordination, and Knowledge) and simplifies subsequent use of the source data by the broader scientific community, particularly with regard to cross-collection analysis.

It must be stressed that this is a **base specification**, defining minimum parameters. It is expected that local conditions in any given project area, specialized applications for the data, or the preferences of cooperators, may mandate more stringent requirements. The

USGS encourages the collection of more detailed, accurate, or value-added data. A list of common upgrades to the minimum requirements defined here is provided in Appendix 1.

In addition, it is recognized that the USGS NGP also employs lidar technology for specialized scientific research and other projects whose requirements are incompatible with the provisions of this Specification. In such cases, and with properly documented justification supporting the need for the variance, waivers of any part or all of this Specification may be granted.

It is conceivable that in some cases, based on specific topography, land cover, intended application, or other factors, the USGS-NGP may require specifications more rigorous than those defined in this document. It is expected that this would be highly uncommon.

Lidar is still a relatively new technology; adolescent but not fully matured.. Advancements and improvements in instrumentation, software, processes, applications, and understanding are constantly being made. It would not be possible to develop a set of guidelines and specifications that address all of these advances. The current document is based on our understanding of and experience with the industry and technology at the present time. Furthermore, we acknowledge that there is a lack of commonly accepted “best practices” for numerous processes and technical assessments (i.e., measurement of NPS, point clustering, classification accuracy, etc.). The USGS encourages the development of such best practices through the appropriate industry and professional governance organizations, and we eagerly await the opportunity to include them in future revisions to this and other similar documents.

It is not the intention of the USGS to stifle the development of the lidar industry, nor to discourage innovation within the technology. Technical alternatives to any part of this document may be submitted with any proposal and will be given due professional consideration.

I. COLLECTION

1. Multiple Discrete Return, capable of at least 3 returns per pulse

Note: Full waveform collection is both acceptable and welcomed; however, waveform data is regarded as supplemental information. The requirement for deriving and delivering multiple discrete returns remains in force in all cases.

2. Intensity values for each return.
3. Nominal **Pulse** Spacing (NPS) of 1-2 meters, dependent on the local terrain and landcover conditions. Assessment to be made against single swath, first return data located within the geometrically usable center portion (typically ~90%) of each swath. Average along-track and cross-track point spacings should be comparable.
4. Collections designed to achieve the NPS through swath overlap or multiple passes are generally discouraged. Such collections may be permitted with prior approval.
5. Data Voids [areas $\Rightarrow (4*NPS)^2$, measured using 1st-returns only] within a single swath are not acceptable, except:
 - where caused by water bodies
 - where caused by areas of low near infra-red (NIR) reflectivity such as asphalt or composition roofing.
 - where appropriately filled-in by another swath
6. The spatial distribution of geometrically usable points is expected to be uniform and free from clustering. In order to ensure uniform densities throughout the data set:
 - A regular grid, with cell size equal to the design $NPS*2$ will be laid over the data.
 - At least 90% of the cells in the grid shall contain at least 1 lidar point.
 - Assessment to be made against single swath, first return data located within the geometrically usable center portion (typically ~90%) of each swath.
 - Acceptable data voids identified previously in this specification are excluded.

Note: This requirement may be relaxed in areas of significant relief where it is impractical to maintain a consistent NPS.

7. Scan Angle: Total FOV should not exceed 40° (+/-20° from nadir) USGS quality assurance on collections performed using scan angles wider than 34° will be particularly rigorous in the edge-of-swath areas. Horizontal and vertical accuracy shall remain within the requirements as specified below.

Note: This requirement is primarily applicable to oscillating mirror lidar systems. Other instrument technologies may be exempt from this requirement.

8. Vertical Accuracy of the lidar data will be assessed and reported in accordance with the guidelines developed by the NDEP and subsequently adopted by the ASPRS. The complete guidelines may be found in Section 1.5 of the Guidelines document. See:

http://www.ndep.gov/NDEP_Elevation_Guidelines_Ver1_10May2004.pdf

Vertical accuracy requirements using the NDEP/ASPRS methodology are:

FVA \leq 24.5cm ACCz, 95% (12.5cm RMSEz)

CVA \leq 36.3cm, 95th Percentile

SVA \leq 36.3cm, 95th Percentile

- Accuracy for the lidar point cloud data is to be reported independently from accuracies of derivative products (i.e., DEMs). Point cloud data accuracy is to be tested against a TIN constructed from bare-earth lidar points.
- Each landcover type representing 10% or more of the total project area must be tested and reported as an SVA.
- For SVAs, the value is provided as a target. It is understood that in areas of dense vegetation, swamps, or extremely difficult terrain, this value may be exceeded. Overall CVA requirements must be met in spite of "busts" in individual SVAs.

Note: These requirements may be relaxed in cases:

- *where there exists a demonstrable and substantial increase in cost to obtain this accuracy.*
 - *where an alternate specification is needed to conform to previously contracted phases of a single larger overall collection effort, i.e., multi-year statewide collections, etc.*
 - *where the USGS agrees that it is reasonable and in the best interest of all stakeholders to use an alternate specification.*
9. Relative accuracy \leq 7cm RMSE_Z within individual swaths; \leq 10cm RMSE_Z within swath overlap (between adjacent swaths).
 10. Flightline overlap 10% or greater, as required to ensure there are no data gaps between the usable portions of the swaths. Collections in high relief terrain are expected to require greater overlap. Any data with gaps between the geometrically usable portions of the swaths will be rejected.
 11. Collection Area: Defined Project Area, buffered by a minimum of 100 meters.
 12. Collection Conditions:
 - Atmospheric: Cloud and fog-free between the aircraft and ground
 - Ground:
 - Snow free. Very light, undrifted snow may be acceptable in special cases, with prior approval.

- No unusual flooding or inundation, except in cases where the goal of the collection is to map the inundation.
- Vegetation: Leaf-off is preferred, however:
 - As numerous factors will affect vegetative condition at the time of any collection, the USGS NGP only requires that penetration to the ground must be adequate to produce an accurate and reliable bare-earth surface suitable for incorporation into the 1/9 (3-meter) NED.
 - Collections for specific scientific research projects may be exempted from this requirement, with prior approval.

II. DATA PROCESSING and HANDLING

1. All processing should be carried out with the understanding that all point deliverables are required to be in fully compliant LAS format, v1.2 or v1.3. Data producers are encouraged to review the LAS specification in detail.
2. If full waveform data is collected, delivery of the waveform packets is required. LAS v1.3 deliverables with waveform data are to use external “auxiliary” files with the extension “.wdp” for the storage of waveform packet data. See the LAS v1.3 Specification for additional information.
3. GPS times are to be recorded as Adjusted GPS Time, at a precision sufficient to allow unique timestamps for each pulse. Adjusted GPS Time is defined to be Standard (or satellite) GPS time minus 1×10^9 . See the LAS Specification for more detail.
4. Horizontal datum shall be referenced to the North American Datum of 1983/HARN adjustment. Vertical datum shall be referenced to the North American Vertical Datum of 1988 (NAVD 88). The most recent NGS-approved Geoid model shall be used to perform conversions from ellipsoidal heights to orthometric heights.
5. The USGS preferred Coordinate Reference System for the Conterminous United States (CONUS) is: UTM, NAD83, Meters. Each discrete project is to be processed using the predominant UTM zone for the overall collection area.

State Plane Coordinate Reference Systems that have been accepted by the European Petroleum Survey Group (EPSG) and that are recognized by ESRI GIS software may be used by prior agreement with the USGS.

Alternative projected coordinate systems for collections in Alaska, Hawaii, and other areas Outside the Conterminous United States (OCONUS) must be approved by the USGS prior to collection.

6. All references to the Unit of Measure “Feet” or “Foot” must specify either “International” or “U.S. Survey”
7. Long swaths (those which result in a LAS file larger than 2GB) should be split into segments no greater than 2GB each. Each segment will thenceforth be

- regarded as a unique swath and shall be assigned a unique File Source ID. Other swath segmentation approaches may be acceptable, with prior approval. Renaming schemes for split swaths are at the discretion of the data producer. The Processing Report shall include detailed information on swath segmentation sufficient to allow reconstruction of the original swaths if needed.
8. Each swath shall be assigned a unique File Source ID. The Point Source ID field for each point within each LAS swath file shall be set equal to the File Source ID prior to any processing of the data. See the LAS Specification.
 9. Point Families (multiple return “children” of a single “parent” pulse) shall be maintained intact through all processing prior to tiling. Multiple returns from a given pulse shall be stored in sequential (collected) order.
 10. All collected swaths are to be delivered as part of the “Raw Data Deliverable”. This includes calibration swaths and cross-ties. All collected points are to be delivered. No points are to be deleted from the swath LAS files. This in no way requires or implies that calibration swath data are to be included in product generation. Excepted from this are extraneous data outside of the buffered project area (aircraft turns, transit between the collection area and airport, transit between fill-in areas, etc.). These points may be permanently removed.
 11. Outliers, blunders, noise points, geometrically unreliable points near the extreme edge of the swath, and other points deemed unusable are to be identified using the “Withheld” flag, as defined in the LAS specification.
 - This applies primarily to points which are identified during pre-processing or through automated post-processing routines.
 - If processing software is not capable of populating the “Withheld” bit, these points may be identified using Class=11.
 - “Noise points” subsequently identified during manual Classification and Quality Assurance/Quality Control (QA/QC) may be assigned the standard LAS classification value for “Noise” (Class=7), regardless of whether the noise is “low” or “high” relative to the ground surface.
 12. The ASPRS/LAS “Overlap” classification (Class=12) shall not be used. ALL points not identified as “Withheld” are to be classified.
 - If overlap points are required to be differentiated by the data producer or cooperating partner, they must be identified using a method that does not interfere with their classification, such as:
 - Overlap points are tagged using Bit:0 of the User Data byte, as defined in the LAS specification. (SET=Overlap).
 - Overlap points are classified using the Standard Class values + 16.
 - Other techniques as agreed upon in advance
 - The technique utilized must be clearly described in the project metadata files.

Note: A standard bit setting for identification of overlap points has been planned for a future version of LAS.

13. Positional Accuracy Validation: The absolute and relative accuracy of the data, both horizontal and vertical, and relative to known control, shall be verified prior to classification and subsequent product development. This validation is obviously limited to the Fundamental Vertical Accuracy, measured in clear, open areas. A detailed report of this validation is a required deliverable.
14. Classification Accuracy: It is expected that due diligence in the classification process will produce data that meets the following test:

Within any 1km x 1km area, no more than 2% of non-withheld points will possess a demonstrably erroneous classification value.

This includes points in Classes 0 and 1 that should correctly be included in a different Class as required by the contract.

Note: This requirement may be relaxed to accommodate collections in areas where the USGS agrees classification to be particularly difficult.

15. Classification Consistency: Point classification is to be consistent across the entire project. Noticeable variations in the character, texture, or quality of the classification between tiles, swaths, lifts, or other non-natural divisions will be cause for rejection of the entire deliverable.

16. Tiles:

Note: This section assumes a projected coordinate reference system.

- A single non-overlapped tiling scheme will be established and agreed upon by the data producer and the USGS prior to collection. This scheme will be used for **all** tiled deliverables.
- Tile size must be an integer multiple of the cell size of raster deliverables.
- Tiles must be sized using the same units as the coordinate system of the data.
- Tiled deliverables shall conform to the tiling scheme, without added overlap.
- Tiled deliverables shall edge-match seamlessly and without gaps in both the horizontal and vertical.

III. HYDRO-FLATTENING REQUIREMENTS

Note: Please refer to Appendix 2 for reference information on hydro-flattening.

Hydro-flattening pertains only to the creation of derived DEMs. No manipulation of or changes to originally computed lidar point elevations are to be made. Breaklines may be used to help classify the point data.

1. Inland Ponds and Lakes:

- ~2-acre or greater surface area (~350' diameter for a round pond) at the time of collection.
- Flat and level water bodies (single elevation for every bank vertex defining a given water body).
- The entire water surface edge must be at or below the immediately surrounding terrain.
- Long impoundments such as reservoirs, inlets, and fjords, whose water surface elevations drop when moving downstream, should be treated as rivers.

2. Inland Streams and Rivers:

- 100' **nominal** width: This should not unnecessarily break a stream or river into multiple segments. At times it may squeeze slightly below 100' for short segments. Data producers should use their best professional judgment.
- Flat and level bank-to-bank (perpendicular to the apparent flow centerline); gradient to follow the immediately surrounding terrain.
- The entire water surface edge must be at or below the immediately surrounding terrain.
- Streams channels should break at road crossings (culvert locations). These road fills should not be removed from DEM. However, streams and rivers should **not** break at elevated bridges. Bridges should be removed from DEM. When the identification of a feature as a bridge or culvert cannot be made reliably, the feature should be regarded as a culvert.

3. Non-Tidal Boundary Waters:

- Represented only as an edge or edges within the project area; collection does not include the opposing shore.
- The entire water surface edge must be at or below the immediately surrounding terrain.
- The elevation along the edge or edges should behave consistently throughout the project. May be a single elevation (i.e., lake) or gradient (i.e., river), as appropriate.

4. Tidal Waters:

- Water bodies such as oceans, seas, gulfs, bays, inlets, salt marshes, very large lakes, etc. Includes any water body that is affected by tidal variations.
- Tidal variations over the course of a collection or between different collections, will result in discontinuities along shorelines. This is considered normal and these “anomalies” should be retained. The final DEM should represent as much ground as the collected data permits.
- Variations in water surface elevation resulting in tidal variations during a collection should NOT be removed or adjusted, as this would require either the removal of valid, measured ground points or the introduction of unmeasured ground into the DEM. The USGS NGP priority is on the ground surface, and accepts there may be occasional, unavoidable irregularities in water surface.
- Scientific research projects in coastal areas often have very specific requirements with regard to how tidal land-water boundaries are to be handled. For such projects, the requirements of the research will take precedence.

Cooperating partners may require collection and integration of single-line streams within their lidar projects. While the USGS does not require these breaklines be collected or integrated, it does require that if used and incorporated into the DEMs, the following guidelines are met:

1. All vertices along single-line stream breaklines are at or below the immediately surrounding terrain.
2. Single-line stream breaklines are not to be used to introduce cuts into the DEM at road crossings (culverts), dams, or other such features. This is hydro-enforcement and as discussed in Section VI, creates a non-traditional DEM that is not suitable for integration into the NED.
3. All breaklines used to modify the surface are to be delivered to the USGS with the DEMs.

The USGS does not require any particular process or methodology be used for breakline collection, extraction, or integration. However, the following general guidelines must be adhered to:

1. Bare-earth lidar points that are in close proximity breaklines should be excluded from the DEM generation process. This is analogous to the removal of masspoints for the same reason in a traditional photogrammetrically compiled DTM.

The proximity threshold for reclassification as “Ignored Ground” is at the discretion of the data producer, but in general should be approximately equal to the NPS.

2. These points are to be retained in the delivered lidar point dataset and shall be reclassified as “Ignored Ground” (class value = 10) so that they may be subsequently identified.
3. Delivered data must be sufficient for the USGS to effectively recreate the delivered DEMs using the lidar points and breaklines without significant further editing.

IV. DELIVERABLES

The USGS shall have unrestricted rights to all delivered data and reports, which will be placed in the public domain. This specification places no restrictions on the data provider's rights to resell data or derivative products as they see fit.

1. Metadata

Note: “Metadata” refers to all descriptive information about the project. This includes textual reports, graphics, supporting shapefiles, and FGDC-compliant metadata files.

- Collection Report detailing mission planning and flight logs.
- Survey Report detailing the collection of control and reference points used for calibration and QA/QC.
- Processing Report detailing calibration, classification, and product generation procedures including methodology used for breakline collection and hydro-flattening (*see Sections III and Appendix I for more information on hydro-flattening*).
- QA/QC Reports (detailing the analysis, accuracy assessment and validation of:
 - The point data (absolute, within swath, and between swath)
 - The bare-earth surface (absolute)
 - Other optional deliverables as appropriate
- Control and Calibration points: All control and reference points used to calibrate, control, process, and validate the lidar point data or any derivative products are to be delivered.
- Geo-referenced, digital spatial representation of the precise extents of each delivered dataset. This should reflect the extents of the actual lidar source or derived product data, exclusive of Triangular Irregular Network (TIN) artifacts or raster NODATA areas. A union of tile boundaries or minimum bounding rectangle is not acceptable. ESRI Polygon shapefile or geodatabase is preferred.
- Product metadata (FGDC compliant, XML format metadata). One file for each:

- Project
- Lift
- Tiled deliverable product group (classified point data, bare-earth DEMs, breaklines, etc.). Metadata files for individual tiles are not required.
- FGDC compliant metadata must pass the USGS metadata parser (“mp”) with no errors or warnings.

2. Raw Point Cloud

- All returns, all collected points, fully calibrated and adjusted to ground, by swath.
- Fully compliant LAS v1.2 or v1.3, Point Record Format 1, 3, 4, or 5
- LAS v1.3 deliverables with waveform data are to use external “auxiliary” files with the extension “.wdp” for the storage of waveform packet data. See the LAS v1.3 Specification for additional information.
- Georeference information included in all LAS file headers
- GPS times are to be recorded as Adjusted GPS Time, at a precision sufficient to allow unique timestamps for each pulse.
- Intensity values (native radiometric resolution)
- 1 file per swath, 1 swath per file, file size not to exceed 2GB, as described in Section II, Paragraph 7.

3. Classified Point Cloud

Note: Delivery of a classified point cloud is a standard requirement for USGS NGP lidar projects. Specific scientific research projects may be exempted from this requirement.

- Fully compliant LAS v1.2 or v1.3, Point Record Format 1, 3, 4, or 5
- LAS v1.3 deliverables with waveform data are to use external “auxiliary” files with the extension “.wdp” for the storage of waveform packet data. See the LAS v1.3 Specification for additional information.
- Georeference information included in LAS header
- GPS times are to be recorded as Adjusted GPS Time, at a precision sufficient to allow unique timestamps for each pulse.
- Intensity values (native radiometric resolution)
- Tiled delivery, without overlap (tiling scheme TBD)

- Classification Scheme (minimum):

Code	Description
1	Processed, but unclassified
2	Bare-earth ground
7	Noise (low or high, manually identified, if needed)
9	Water
10	Ignored Ground (Breakline Proximity)
11	Withheld (if the “Withheld” bit is not implemented in processing software)

Note: Class 7, Noise, is included as an adjunct to the “Withheld” bit. All “noise points” are to be identified using one of these methods.

Note: Class 10, Ignored Ground, is for points previously classified as bare-earth but whose proximity to a subsequently added breakline requires that it be excluded during Digital Elevation Model (DEM) generation.

4. Bare Earth Surface (Raster DEM)

Note: Delivery of a bare-earth DEM is a standard requirement for USGS NGP lidar projects. Specific scientific research projects may be exempted from this requirement.

- Cell Size no greater than 3 meters or 10 feet, and no less than the design Nominal Pulse Spacing (NPS).
- Delivery in an industry-standard, GIS-compatible, 32-bit floating point raster format (ERDAS .IMG preferred)
- Georeference information shall be included in each raster file
- Tiled delivery, without overlap
- DEM tiles will show no edge artifacts or mismatch. A quilted appearance in the overall project DEM surface, whether caused by differences in processing quality or character between tiles, swaths, lifts, or other non-natural divisions, will be cause for rejection of the entire DEM deliverable.
- Void areas (i.e., areas outside the project boundary but within the tiling scheme) shall be coded using a unique “NODATA” value. This value shall be identified in the appropriate location within the file header.
- Vertical Accuracy of the bare earth surface will be assessed and reported in accordance with the guidelines developed by the NDEP and subsequently adopted by the ASPRS. The complete guidelines may be found in Section 1.5 of the Guidelines document. See:

http://www.ndep.gov/NDEP_Elevation_Guidelines_Ver1_10May2004.pdf

Vertical accuracy requirements using the NDEP/ASPRS methodology are:

FVA \leq 24.5cm ACCz, 95% (12.5cm RMSEz)

CVA \leq 36.3cm, 95th Percentile

SVA \leq 36.3cm, 95th Percentile

All QA/QC analysis materials and results are to be delivered to the USGS.

- Depressions (sinks), natural or man-made, are **not** to be filled (as in hydro-conditioning and hydro-enforcement).
- Water Bodies (ponds and lakes), wide streams and rivers (“double-line”), and other non-tidal water bodies as defined in Section III are to be hydro-flattened within the DEM. Hydro-flattening shall be applied to all water impoundments, natural or man-made, that are larger than ~2 acre in area (equivalent to a round pond ~350’ in diameter), to all streams that are nominally wider than 100’, and to all non-tidal boundary waters bordering the project area regardless of size. The methodology used for hydro-flattening is at the discretion of the data producer.

Note: Please refer to the Sections III and VI for detailed discussions of hydro-flattening.

5. Breaklines

Note: Delivery of the breaklines used in hydro-flattening is a standard requirement for USGS NGP lidar projects. Specific scientific research projects may be exempted from this requirement. If hydro-flattening is achieved through other means, this section may not apply.

- All breaklines developed for use in hydro-flattening shall be delivered as an ESRI feature class (PolylineZ or PolygonZ format, as appropriate to the type of feature represented and the methodology used by the data producer). Shapefile or geodatabase is preferred.
- Each feature class or shapefile will include properly formatted and accurate georeference information in the standard location. All shapefiles must include the companion .prj file.
- Breaklines must use the same coordinate reference system (horizontal and vertical) and units as the lidar point delivery.
- Breakline delivery may be as a continuous layer or in tiles, at the discretion of the data producer. Tiled deliveries must edge-match seamlessly in both the horizontal and vertical.

APPENDIX 1
COMMON DATA UPGRADES

1. Independent 3rd-Party QA/QC by another AE Contractor (encouraged)
2. Higher Nominal Pulse Spacing (point density)
3. Increased Vertical Accuracy
4. Full Waveform collection and delivery
5. Additional Environmental Constraints
 - Tidal coordination, flood stages, crop/plant growth cycles, etc.
 - Shorelines corrected for tidal variations within a collection
6. Top-of Canopy (First-Return) Raster Surface (tiled). Raster representing the highest return within each cell is preferred.
7. Intensity Images (8-bit gray scale, tiled)
8. Detailed Classification (additional classes):

Code	Description
3	Low vegetation
4	Medium vegetation (use for single vegetation class)
5	High vegetation
6	Buildings, bridges, other man-made structures
n	additional Class(es) as agreed upon in advance

9. Hydro-Enforced and/or Hydro-Conditioned DEMs
10. Breaklines (PolylineZ and PolygonZ) for single-line hydrographic features (narrow streams not collected as double-line, culverts, etc.), including appropriate integration into delivered DEMs
11. Breaklines (PolylineZ and PolygonZ) for other features (TBD), including appropriate integration into delivered DEMs
12. Extracted Buildings (PolygonZ): Footprints with maximum elevation and/or height above ground as an attribute.
13. Other products as defined by requirements and agreed upon in advance of funding commitment.

APPENDIX 2

HYDRO-FLATTENING REFERENCE

The subject of modifications to lidar-based DEMs is somewhat new, and although authoritative references are available, there remains significant variation in the understanding of the topic across the industry. The following material was developed to provide a definitive reference on the subject only as it relates to the creation of DEMs intended to be integrated into the USGS NED. The information presented here is not meant to supplant other reference materials and it should not be considered authoritative beyond its intended scope.

The term “**hydro-flattening**” is also new, coined for this document and to convey our specific needs. It is not, at this time, a known or accepted term across the industry. It is our hope that its use and acceptance will expand beyond the USGS with the assistance of other industry leaders.

Hydro-flattening of DEMs is predominantly accomplished through the use of breaklines, and this method is considered standard. Although other techniques may exist to achieve similar results, this section assumes the use of breaklines. The USGS does not require the use of any specific technique.

The Digital Elevation Model Technologies and Applications: The DEM Users Manual, 2nd Edition (Maune *et al.*, 2007) provides the following definitions related to the adjustment of DEM surfaces for hydrologic analyses:

1. **Hydrologically-Conditioned (Hydro-Conditioned)** – Processing of a DEM or TIN so that the flow of water is continuous across the entire terrain surface, including the removal of all spurious sinks or pits. The only sinks that are retained are the real ones on the landscape. Whereas “hydrologically-enforced” is relevant to drainage features that are generally mapped, “hydrologically-conditioned” is relevant to the entire land surface and is done so that water flow is continuous across the surface, whether that flow is in a stream channel or not. The purpose for continuous flow is so that relationships/links among basins/catchments can be known for large areas. This term is specifically used when describing EDNA (see Chapter 4), the dataset of NED derivatives made specifically for hydrologic modeling purposes.
2. **Hydrologically-Enforced (Hydro-Enforced)** – Processing of mapped water bodies so that lakes and reservoirs are level and so that streams flow downhill. For example, a DEM, TIN or topographic contour dataset with elevations removed from the tops of selected drainage structures (bridges and culverts) so as to depict the terrain under those structures. Hydro-enforcement enables hydrologic and hydraulic models to depict water flowing under these structures, rather than appearing in the computer model to be dammed by them because of road deck elevations higher than the water levels. Hydro-enforced TINs also utilize breaklines along shorelines and stream centerlines, for example, where these breaklines form the edges of TIN triangles along the alignment of drainage features. Shore breaklines for streams would be 3-D breaklines

with elevations that decrease as the stream flows downstream; however, shore breaklines for lakes or reservoirs would have the same elevation for the entire shoreline if the water surface is known or assumed to be level throughout. See figures 1.21 through 1.24. See also the definition for “hydrologically-conditioned” which has a slightly different meaning.

While these are important and useful modifications, they both result in surfaces that differ significantly from a traditional DEM. A “hydro-conditioned” surface has had its sinks filled and may have had its water bodies flattened. This is necessary for correct flow modeling within and across large drainage basins. “Hydro-enforcement” extends this conditioning by requiring water bodies be leveled and streams flattened with the appropriate downhill gradient, and also by cutting through road crossings over streams (culvert locations) to allow a continuous flow path for water within the drainage. Both treatments result in a surface on which water behaves as it physically does in the real world, and both are invaluable for specific types of hydraulic and hydrologic (H&H) modeling activities. Neither of these treatments is typical of a traditional DEM surface.

A traditional DEM such as the NED, on the other hand, attempts to represent the ground surface more the way a bird, or person in an airplane, sees it. On this surface, natural depressions exist, and road fills create apparent sinks because the road fill and surface is depicted without regard to the culvert beneath. Bridges, it should be noted, are removed in most all types of DEMs because they are man-made, above-ground structures that have been added to the landscape.

Note: DEMs developed solely for orthophoto production may include bridges, as their presence can prevent the “smearing” of structures and reduce the amount of post-production correction of the final orthophoto. These are “special use DEMs” and are not relevant to this discussion.

For years, raster Digital Elevation Models (DEMs), have been created from a Digital Surface Model (DSM) of masspoints and breaklines, which in turn were created through photogrammetric compilation from stereo imagery. Photogrammetric DSMs inherently contain breaklines defining the edges of water bodies, coastlines, single-line streams, and double-line streams and rivers, as well as numerous other surface features.

Lidar technology, however, does not inherently collect the breaklines necessary to produce traditional DEMs. Breaklines have to be developed separately through a variety of techniques, and either used with the lidar points in the generation of the DEM, or applied as a correction to DEMs generated without breaklines.

In order to maintain the consistent character of the NED as a traditional DEM, the USGS NGP requires that all DEMs delivered have their inland water bodies flattened. This does not imply that a complete network of topologically correct hydrologic breaklines be developed for every dataset; only those breaklines necessary to ensure that the conditions defined in Section III exist in the final DEM.

APPENDIX 3
SAMPLE METADATA TEMPLATE

[to be added]

DRAFT

APPENDIX 4

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