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Ice, snow help lake levels in Michigan

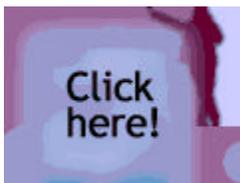
Freezing stops evaporation, and that would aid shipping

December 27, 2000

BY JAMES G. HILL
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

The snow and cold weather that have gripped the state and thrilled skiers are good news for boaters and other recreational and commercial users of the Great Lakes waterways ...if they continue.

Water levels, near their record lows for most of the year, could benefit from this season's early ice formation, which prevents evaporation.



When cold air blows over the lakes' warmer open waters, it can scoop off an inch or more of water a week during fall and winter.



"All the snow and cold weather we have gotten so far this winter season probably won't bring things back to normal in the Great Lakes even if we continue to experience this type of weather, but it will make things better this spring than we saw last spring," said Frank H. Quinn, senior research hydrologist for the Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Ann Arbor.

"We really can't predict what will happen in January and February, but based on what is happening now, it looks favorable for lake levels this spring," Quinn said.

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The National Weather Service forecast for January, February and March indicates continued below-normal temperatures with normal or higher precipitation.

"We've been way below normal in December for temperature," said Dennis Dixon, a meteorologist with the service's White Lake Township office.

"We would have to continue the colder-than-normal temperatures through the end of January at least to get the ice cover on the deep-water parts of Lakes Michigan, Huron and Superior to get lake levels up.... The shallow basins of these lakes are pretty well iced up now."

Water levels on the upper Great Lakes, excluding Superior, have fallen more than 3 feet in the last three years, though an unusually wet spring and summer slowed the decline this year.

The lower lake levels have meant millions in losses to the shipping industry, which must run lighter loads, and to water-based businesses such as marinas that have had to dredge deeper channels so boats can dock. Some home owners on canals can no longer get their boats in and out.

The large lakes rely heavily on melting snow to replenish water. For example, about 40 percent of Lake Superior's annual water supply comes from the snowpack around its shores. In recent winters, that snowpack has been sparse, contributing to falling levels throughout the Great Lakes system.

The normal seasonal rise on the Great Lakes and Lake St. Clair from melting snow is about 11 inches. Last year it was about seven inches.

December 2000 is the fifth-snowiest December on record so far, said Adam Fox, a hydrologist with the Army Corps of Engineers Detroit office. However, where it really counts -- around Lake Superior and northern Lake Huron and Lake Michigan -- it is relatively dry, as it has been the last two years, he said.

Most of the snow in the Detroit area has come from Canada and the western plains. Most of the snow in the UP and northern and western portions of the state has been lake-effect, Fox said, meaning that it comes from evaporation turned into snow.

"What we need is a good snowpack up there, especially Lake Superior," Fox said. "Like in the summer, most of the rain we saw in the state fell on the Lower Peninsula and not the northern Great Lakes region. If we can get some precipitation across the northern land then things could obviously turn around."

Contact **JAMES G. HILL** at 313-222-6678 or jhill@freepress.com.

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