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Thursday 4 January, 2001

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Snow may bode well for lake levels next year

By: Jameson Cook, Macomb Daily Staff Writer

December 27, 2000

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Macomb Daily photo by David Dalton

A lone fisherman heads out onto the ice of Lake St. Clair at Metro Beach. This year's bitter cold is a bonus for ice fishermen, and heavy December snows may help raise low lake levels next year.

While many people view the recent snow and cold wave as a curse, Lake St. Clair enthusiasts see it as an investment that could pay dividends next summer.

The healthy dose of snow in Macomb County and throughout the Great Lakes could help to heighten lake levels, which have dipped to near record-low numbers the past couple of years.

"This snow will be a plus for raising the lake levels, assuming it stays on the ground throughout the winter," said Dr. Frank Quinn, senior research hydrologist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory in Ann Arbor.

"This is the most promising it has looked in several years for increasing the lake levels next spring," Quinn said.

The metropolitan Detroit area has received double the normal snowfall in December, and the Grand Rapids and Flint areas record amounts, triple the typical December. The Upper Peninsula also has seen near-record amounts.

Besides increased snowfall, also boding well for higher waters is the earlier colder temperatures, which are freezing the lakes and reducing evaporation, experts said.

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The low lake levels, resulting from mild winters from 1997 through last year, have cut into the pocketbooks of marina owners in the form of lost business and dredging costs. Boaters in some cases have been unable to gain access to the lake or damaged their craft because of dangerously low levels.

Greg Gwizdowski of St. Clair Shores, a boater whose neighborhood pooled \$60,000 to have a canal dredged, said he prays for the snow to continue.

"I told a group of people after that first snowfall we had that my prayers have been answered," he said. "They all looked at me kind of cross-eyed.

"I don't mind shoveling it. I have selfish motives."

But despite the optimism, experts cautioned it is too early to tell if the high amount of snowfall so far this year means waters will rise next year.

The snow will have to continue to fall at an average or better amount and temperatures will need to stay average or below for the rest of this winter, experts said.

In addition, the snowfall hasn't been in the perfect spots for raising lake levels. The snow storms have traveled further south than usual, dumping high amounts on the southern Great Lakes and northern Ohio Valley regions. Snowstorms would have been better in northern Michigan and in the Lake Superior basin, where the winter's snow pack greatly determines the Great Lakes' annual spring rise, said Adam Fox, hydrologist with the Army Corps of Engineers.

While the Lake Superior region has seen snowfalls nearly double their average, most have been due to "lake effect" storms that recycle moisture instead of drawing it from other areas, Fox said. Those snowfalls result from local conditions: cold air colliding with warmer water.

The snowfalls in southern Michigan have originated from outside the area.

"We need to have a normalized winter pattern" in which storms from the west cross more north, Fox said.

Precipitation also is going to have to continue at above average rates for the next couple of years to return lake levels to normal, Fox said.

Gwizdowski realized that. "It'll take two solid years to replenish the water."

Fox said the current status of Lake St. Clair water level being only moderately below average -- nine inches -- is due to the rainy and cool summer, "a temporary condition" of lower evaporation and higher precipitation that could change.

Lake St. Clair is more susceptible to shorter-term influxes because it's shallow compared to lakes Michigan, Huron and Superior, Fox said.

The forecast for the Great Lakes region for January through March, according to the National Weather Service, is an average amount of precipitation and below-average temperatures.

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