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Snow unlikely to raise lake levels

It's expected they'll continue to drop this year despite snowfall

By **DAVE YONKMAN**
Staff writer

This winter's heavy snowfall and persistent below-freezing temperatures more than likely won't do much to raise low lake levels.

Ross Kittleman of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Grand Haven office says that if anything, lake levels will continue to drop next year. He said that snow the area has been receiving is largely lake effect, which occurs when warm, dry air moving over Lake Michigan picks up moisture and deposits it over cold inland areas.

"It's nothing more than water that was in the lake already," Kittleman said in a telephone interview on Wednesday. "At this point in time, if that's the only snowfall we're going to get, it really won't have a significant impact."

It would take storms from outside the Great Lakes to move in and deposit new moisture. Kittleman added that Lake Michigan is 7 to 8 inches lower than a year ago.

"It will take a considerable amount of precipitation coming from outside the Great Lakes basin, and we're just not seeing that yet," Kittleman said.

But cold temperatures and heavy snowfall can't hurt matters.

Temperatures below freezing store moisture inland until it drains back into the lake in the spring and summer rather than evaporating.



A wave crashes into the ice-covered north breakwater at Holland State Park on a windy Wednesday afternoon.

Sentinel/Dan Irving

A frozen Lake Michigan surface also prevents water from escaping into the atmosphere and stops water from flowing, according to Chuck Pistis, director of Ottawa County's Michigan State University Extension office.

"It's good that we're getting snow," Pistis said. "What's happening now can't hurt things."

Herb Eldean of Eldean Shipyard said that although he operates in one of the deeper areas of Lake Macatawa, low lake levels required him to dredge last summer. If the lake falls any lower, he said he'll likely have to repeat the process.

"We don't want to dredge again," Eldean said.

Low lake levels have been a boon for Saugatuck businessman R.J. Peterson's dredging business. Peterson, owner of Tower Marine, said that because water levels continue to drop, boat owners have been using his marina more than his competitors.

However, he said that he expects lake levels to rise because of heavy snowfall over Lake Superior, which drains into Lake Michigan.

"I really think the water levels are going to go up," he said.

Great Lakes shippers were forced to end their season early this year because of low waters, but the harsh winter weather may help prevent the problem next year.

Snow and ice are good news for Lake Erie, said Frank Quinn, a senior hydrologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory in Ann Arbor.

And a cold, snowy winter in Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin and western Ontario will help replenish Lake Superior, which is the largest of the Great Lakes, he said. It is at its lowest water level since the 1920s.

The past several winters have been unusually warm -- one reason why the Great Lakes' water levels have dropped from near-record highs in the late 1990s to drastic lows this year. Warm temperatures aid evaporation and prevent snowfalls that feed water back into the lakes.

"Maybe there's some dividends down the road for us," Stuart Theis, president of Oglebay Norton Marine Services Co., said. The company had to cut its freighters' loads by 10 percent this year because of low water levels.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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