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## Lake Erie may be foot lower this summer than last

### Mild winters in upper Great Lakes mean less water

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#### FROM STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

Water levels in Lake Erie could be a foot lower this summer than they were the year before, state officials say.

The predictions are based on weather factors that include decreased precipitation in Ohio the last six months, dry and mild winters the past few years and smaller snow packs in the upper Great Lakes.

For boaters, lower lake levels could make getting to docks harder and running into rocks, stumps and other obstacles easier, said Dan Fuller, supervisor of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources' watercraft division.

"You can't assume that water you previously boated on is safe, even if you boated there 15 to 20 years or more," he said.

The lake's water level in February is nearly the same as last winter, but the level is expected to rise less than normal during the spring, said Ohio Sea Grant Extension Specialist Fred Snyder.

Forecasts from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association, the Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory and the Army Corps of Engineers say the lake's summer peak level will be 8 to 12 inches below last year's peak, Snyder said.

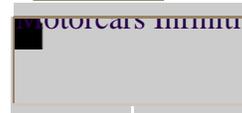
Marinas spent millions on dredging last year, which should lessen the blow this summer, said Norm Schultz, president of the Lake Erie Marine Trades Association, an industry trade group.

Bill Schaeffer, who owns Beaver Park Marina in Lorain, said about 4,000 truckloads of mud and silt were dredged from around his marina last year.

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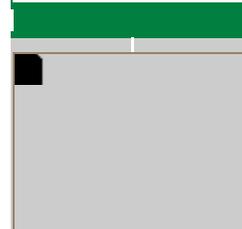
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"I would think people are pretty prepared," Schaeffer said.

Water levels in Lake Erie have been dropping since 1999, said Tony Eberhardt, chief of water control for the Army Corps of Engineers' regional office in Buffalo.

But Lake Erie is still better off than Great Lakes to the north, particularly Lakes Superior, Michigan and Huron, he said. Even if Lake Erie drops a foot, shipping routes should be deep enough for commercial traffic, he said.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources said the state's average rainfall for January was less than half the normal 2.78 inches, making it the ninth-driest January in the past 119 years.

Ohio rainwater and melted water from northern snow packs in Minnesota, Michigan and Canada help fill Lake Erie.

Lake Superior is at its lowest level since 1926, and Lake Michigan is at its lowest level since 1965, said Frank Quinn, a hydrologist at the Great Lakes laboratory. Quinn said that besides receiving below-normal winter precipitation from the upper Great Lakes, the Lake Erie region's ice coverage was below normal.

Even in winter, open water allows continuous lake water evaporation, he said. This means that even though the northern snow base is larger this year, the water will fill the upper Great Lakes first and not reach Lake Erie any time soon, Snyder said.

The Coast Guard's Lakeside-Marblehead and Lorain stations said they had not noticed any difficulties resulting from low water levels this year. A barge hit bottom near Kelleys Island because of low water in the fall.

"We haven't had any problems yet because the freighters won't start moving for a couple weeks," Petty Officer Shawn Dickerson said. "At this point, we haven't received any special instructions about marking any dangers. We just recommend boaters use charts and any means available to know where the water is safe."

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