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Lake Michigan could use a fillup about now

February 28, 2001

BY GARY WISBY ENVIRONMENT REPORTER

Snow-starved Lake Michigan has that sinking feeling.

The lake could even reach its record low by summer, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers warned Tuesday.

That has sailors, marina operators and commercial shippers praying for precipitation.

"Our marina was built for average lake levels," said Mary Walker, harbormaster at Waukegan Harbor. "If our locks and marina become inaccessible, it hurts the bottom line."

For Lake Michigan to rise appreciably, Lake Superior--which feeds the entire Great Lakes system--needs a lot more snow than it has gotten so far, corps officials said. Some heavy snow hit Wisconsin, but when it melts most of the water will head for the Mississippi River watershed, corps hydrologist Adam Fox said.

"Lake Michigan is 22 inches below the long-term level for this time of year," he said. With the lake continuing to fall, "even with a normal spring rise it will be two feet below the long-term average by June."

At 576.74 feet above sea level, the lake is about six inches above the record low for February. If spring is exceptionally dry, "we're getting within striking distance" of the record low of 576.06 feet set in March 1964, Fox said.

It may not get that bad. The National Weather Service expects near-normal precipitation for the upper Midwest next month. From now through May--a period Fox calls "makeup time for the lake"--slightly above-normal precipitation is forecast for the Chicago area.

But even if the level doesn't dip severely, tough times are in store for

lake-going vessels large and small.

"We're going to have to continue to light-load our ships [so they don't run the risk of touching bottom when docking]," said Glen Nekvasil, spokesman for the Lake Carriers Association. "We can't make our ships go much faster than they're going. . . . Some cargo doesn't get delivered."

The Chicago Yacht Club spent \$40,000 last year on dock lowering and related work because sailboats participating in the Mackinac Race and other regattas couldn't pull in.

But Walter "Gibby" Vartan, commodore of the club, said it can work around lake-level problems, as it did in the record year of '64. "It's just the lake doing its thing," he said.

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