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More lake dredging urged

But some fear action will uncover pollutants

Todd McInturf / The Detroit News

Robert Flanigan, of Roseville, installs wiring for an electronic radar fishfinder. As employees at area marinas prepare for the upcoming boating season they are hoping an increase in Great Lakes dredging will improve bottom clearance for boaters.

By Jeremy Pearce / The Detroit News

HARRISON TOWNSHIP -- Forecasts for a third year of falling Great Lakes waters are increasing demands on state and federal officials to dredge away bottom muck and ease passage for frustrated Michigan boaters.

Requests for dredging marinas, canals, boat clubs and harbors rose by 40 percent during the past year, topping 800 for the first time in memory, according to federal figures.

Lake experts say the demand reflects an epic retreat in water levels, bringing major environmental changes as well as pitfalls for boaters and shoreline businesses.

"People won't tend to realize what's going on until they try to put their boats in the water," said Walter Gauthier of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which oversees all dredging in the lakes.

Metro Detroit communities that received dredging permits last year included Grosse Pointe, St. Clair Shores, Grosse Pointe Farms and Grosse Pointe

Todd McInturf / The Detroit News

Lower lake levels have increased the demand for dredging. Here, an excavator dredges the Clinton River above the spillway damn near Shadyside Park in Mt. Clemens.

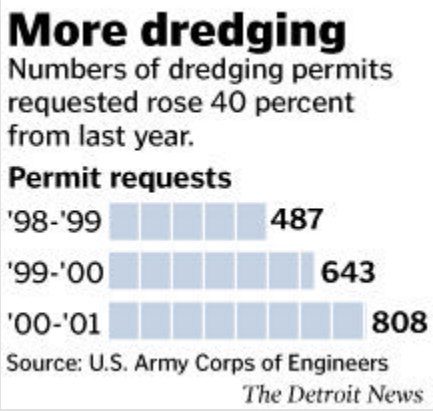
Marina loans

Pointe Farms and Grosse Pointe Shores.

While increased Great Lakes dredging improves bottom clearance for boaters, it's alarming scientists, who say the practice uncovers PCBs, mercury, pesticides and other toxins trapped in bottom sediments. The compounds are revived to enter the food chain, and they reach fish and the anglers who catch and eat them.

"We're digging down into layers that haven't been disturbed in decades," said Dr. Russell Kreis of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Large Lakes Research Station on Grosse Ile.

Michigan lawmakers have set aside $20 million for emergency low-interest loans to small marinas in need of dredging. The program is limited to public marinas of no more than 200 boat slips. To learn more, click on www.deq.state.mi.us/lwm/



In the Detroit River alone, there are at least 30 areas where sediments are extremely polluted. Experts have detected lead, zinc, cadmium, DDT, toxophene and diesel fuel, among other toxins. Permit requests to dredge Michigan's polluted sites doubled to reach 30 during the past year, according to Army Corps records.

"We're stirring up contaminated material in the water column and in many cases sending the contaminants downstream," Kreis said.

Lake Superior's levels remain 13 inches below the long-term average; Lakes Michigan and Huron have fallen by 23 inches; Lake Erie is down by 9 inches; and Lake Ontario is 4 inches below its average.

Nearest to Metro Detroit, the shallow waters of Lake St. Clair have dipped eight inches below their long-term average.

As Detroit opens its annual boat show this weekend, some wonder how the forecast for continuing lower waters will affect boaters. Michigan boat registrations have topped 1 million.

"Low waters or not, people are still going to be out operating their boats," said Van W. Snider, president of the Michigan Boating Industries Association, a trade group that represents boat builders and retailers.

"There are a lot of places that haven't been dredged," Snider said. "You're just going to have to read your charts."

In a move to aid shoreline businesses, Michigan lawmakers last year created a $20-million emergency loan fund to allow smaller marinas pay for dredging.

The fund was designed to provide $75,000 loans for at least 266 marinas. Interest rates are capped at 6 percent, with most of the money coming from the state's surplus funds, which are deposited in banks.

But the program, which opened toward the end of last summer's boating season, appeared too late for some marinas. To date, a total of only $365,000 has been expended among eight loan applicants.

That leaves $19.6 million available for dredging this year.

"We really didn't come on line until last fall, but the fund is being used,"

said state Rep. Scott Shackleton, R-Sault Ste. Marie, who helped create the program.

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