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Boaters beware: Water levels on Great Lakes predicted to be low this year

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BURLINGTON, Ontario (AP) -- Water levels on the Great Lakes are predicted to be dangerously low again this year, and boaters are warned to watch for uncharted rocks and shoals.

Ralph Moulton, manager of the water level information office of Environment Canada at the Canada Centre for Inland Waters, says levels on all lakes except Ontario are expected to be below average this summer.

And, unless the coming months are extremely wet, they will fall below last year's levels when craft ran aground and the water around some marinas was too shallow to permit docking.

Marine traffic was spared the full brunt of the disaster that been predicted for 2000 because large amounts of rain kept the water higher than forecast.

This year, however, boaters might not be so lucky.

"We think that Lakes Superior and Huron will probably be in the range of (4 to 6 inches) lower than they were last summer -- and they were already quite low last year," said Moulton.

"And we think that Lakes St. Clair and Erie will be more like (10 inches) below last year's levels."

The water on all of those lakes, except Superior, is anticipated to be at its lowest level in 35 years. Lake Superior could be lower than it's been in 75 years.

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Lake Ontario is generally spared from giant fluctuations because its levels are regulated. But the drop in the northern lakes could pose hazards for boaters, said Moulton.

Shipping companies already are saying they will have to lighten the loads on freighters to compensate for the drop in water. And recreational boaters should be equally wary of the problem, Moulton said.

"People tend to go by memory," he said. "And they say 'I've always been able to sail through this area or I've always been able to navigate through this area.' Well, that won't necessarily be the case."

The water levels go up and down over time, and the fact that 1998 and 1999 were the two warmest years on record dating back half a century has caused the lakes to drop, Moulton said.

Warm temperatures increase evaporation from the lakes, boost evaporation from streams that run into the lakes, cause plants to use more of the water that would normally feed the lakes, and reduce ice cover that prevents evaporation during the winter months.

Dr. Frank Quinn, senior research hydrologist with the Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory in Ann Arbor, Mich., said the large amount of snow that is just beginning to melt around Lake Superior will keep the levels high in the short term.

But as the season goes on, all the lakes will likely be down unless a lot of rain falls, Quinn said.

"We have a little problem with being able to predict the weather in advance," he said.

Weather forecasters currently suggest temperatures will be about normal between April and June, but the western part of the Great Lakes basin will receive above-average precipitation, he said.

"So that will be a plus if that comes to be."

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