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Lake Ontario level buoys hopes

Forecasts suggest good summer for boaters, shippers, homeowners

[By Lauren Stanforth](#)

Democrat and Chronicle

(Sunday, April 22, 2001) -- If there is such a thing as lake envy, residents around lakes Superior, Michigan, Huron and Erie must have it.

This summer, Lake Ontario is expected to be the only Great Lake to maintain its average level. That means recreational boaters and commercial shippers can navigate without fear, and lakeside homeowners won't have their wells dry up or see their back yards turn into beaches.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers data shows Lake Ontario's current level of 245.67 feet is 1 inch higher than last year. But Lake Ontario is expected to rise 6 more inches next month -- more than twice the increase of Lake Erie. Levels typically rise in the spring because of water runoff and rain.

Steve Gibbs, owner of Braddock Bay Marina, said the extra snow the area received over the winter -- about 40 inches more than average -- will help keep the lake level high.

"I was out in the channel this morning in waders, and it's quite a bit higher than it is normally," Gibbs said. "It's great news."

The other Great Lakes continue to see up to 40-year lows for water levels; Lake Superior is expected to drop to levels not seen since 1926. The decrease is caused by low precipitation and little ice cover to keep water from evaporating during the winter. In fact, a dry summer could push the other Great Lakes to near record lows, according to the Corps of Engineers.

But Lake Ontario's enviable status is not driven by nature -- it's man-made. The level is largely maintained by holding back water at the Moses-Saunders-Power Dam on the St. Lawrence River near Massena.

Once the water passes that point in the St. Lawrence Seaway, it is eventually lost to the Atlantic Ocean.

The International St. Lawrence River Board of Control has decided to hold back 7 centimeters, or about 2.8 inches, from the seaway this summer.

But for Claude Mailloux, assistant executive director of the St. Lawrence Economic Development Council, that's not enough.

The shipping industry at the Port of Montreal is being greatly affected by the low levels; shippers must reduce cargo to navigate safely. The port is expected to be 1 to 2 feet below average this summer, said John Kangas, U.S. secretary for the International St. Lawrence River Board of Control.

Mailloux would like to see 10 centimeters, or 4 inches, of water held back in case the St. Lawrence Seaway needs it.

"We should take advantage of this situation and build some reserve in Lake Ontario," Mailloux said in a recent International Joint Commission teleconference with lake experts and members of the media. The International Joint Commission is an international agency that oversees issues affecting water shared by the United States and Canada.

"One centimeter of reserve means 15 centimeters of water in the Port of Montreal," Mailloux said.

But Thomas Baldini, chairman of the U.S. section of the International Joint Commission, said that's not likely to happen. Concerns voiced by lakeside residents about possible flooding are too great, he said.

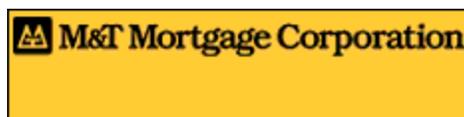
"If you store water, (the level) goes much higher. It raises the risks during a storm event," Kangas said. "Wind-driven waves cause shoreline flooding. You balance the risk to shore property vs. ships not being able to use Montreal harbor."

While the River Board of Control predicts an average level for Lake Ontario, all that could change if it's a tremendously rainy summer.

Last August, Rochester-area residents and lakeside property owners asked the board to let some water out into the seaway, after heavy rains raised the lake level 8 inches higher than normal.

"Right now we don't see a threat from Mother Nature," said Greece lakeside resident Jim Schirmer, who is also a member of the Grand View Beach Association. "But you really don't know what's going to happen."

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