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WESTERN NEW YORK

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Another low mark

Boaters beware. Lake levels, which took a dive last year, will be sinking even lower this year despite the second-snowiest winter in Buffalo's history.

By JOHN F. BONFATTI
News Staff Reporter
5/9/01

Get ready for another summer of bigger beaches - and banged-up boats. Low last year, Lake Erie looks to be even lower this year.

How much lower? The Army Corps of Engineers' latest forecast has the lake six to seven inches lower than last year, when it hits its annual high sometime later this month. Already the lake is 11 inches below its long-term average.

Even the second-snowiest winter in Buffalo's recorded weather history won't help: Most of that snow was lake effect, meaning it was water in the lake before it was snow on the ground.

Most of Lake Erie's water, about 80 percent, comes from the upper Great Lakes, but those lakes are in worse shape than here.

The rains that have swollen the Mississippi River have helped increase the level of Lake Superior recently. But after three straight years of near-drought conditions there, all that is doing is refilling the lake, which remains eight inches below its historical average.

It's much worse in Lakes Michigan and Huron, which rise and fall as one. As of



MICHAEL GROLL/Buffalo News
Dredging operations, such as this one by Buffalo Industrial Diving at Sandy Beach Yacht Club on Grand Island, are being done around the Great Lakes, which are at low levels.



MICHAEL GROLL/Buffalo News
The dredging business has grown to be a big part of Buffalo Industrial Diving, which grew by 300 percent last year.

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the end of April, they were 21 inches below average, while Lake St. Clair was 15 inches below average. Lake Ontario, whose levels are subject to control, is only four inches below average.

The projected drop in lake levels has the New York Power Authority warning customers of power cutbacks.

It also has motorboat owners worried about launching their crafts, and sailboat owners hoping it will be deep enough for them as they navigate in shallow water.

And it has people like Mark C. Judd gearing up for another busy summer.

Judd is president of Buffalo Industrial Diving Co., which does boat maintenance and marine construction. These days, though, dredging is a big part of Judd's business.

"I am 15 men shy, and right now I'm calling all around the country looking for quality divers," said Judd, whose company grew by 300 percent last year.

Some of that growth was expansion-related, but Judd estimated that perhaps 25 percent of it was related to scooping out material from clogged boat launches, channels and marinas.

"This year, we are noting an increase in dredging activity, and I think next year is the year we're going to see a major increase because it's not going to be just considered a fluke," he said.

Dredging along the Great Lakes is already growing. Roger Gauthier, a lakes level expert with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, said the corps' Detroit district has granted twice the number of dredging permits over the past two years than it did for the period prior to 1997.

"What we see is there is a greater demand for dredging at small-draft harbors," Gauthier said. "There's only a finite number of marine contractors, and they're all in demand, so their prices are going up."

They are in demand because some harbors and marinas find themselves higher and drier than they want to be.

The Town of Hamburg was dredging the boat launch at Hamburg Town Park this week, though town Highway Superintendent Jim Connolly said that itself isn't unusual because of the way sand redistributes itself over the winter.

What is unusual is that, for the second year in a row, it looks as if the dock adjacent to the launch site won't make it to water this year. "It is on stationary poles," Connolly said. "The water has gone so low, the docks, at this point, would not be functional."

The good news in Hamburg, Connolly said, is that sun worshipers have "basically gained a fair amount of real estate" on the town's beaches.

Less water affects different kinds of boats in different ways. For motorboat operators, an encounter with an unseen obstacle that is now closer to the surface can lead to expensive repairs to engines and fiberglass hulls.

"We stock a lot more propellers now," said Bob Bieber, president of Bird Island

Marine in Hamburg, who estimated repairs related to low water jumped about 75 percent last year.

"Last year, we had a record number of repairs for low-water incidents," he said. "We had one in early April last year, and we've already had a couple from this year. I expect a lot of damage due to people running around and not really knowing where they are."

Bieber said he had just received a call from a boat owner asking to repair the fiberglass hull of his 26-foot boat that had run aground.

For many sailboats, the problems are related to the keels under the boat that provide stability.

Even experienced sailers such as Mark Sender, fleet captain of the Buffalo Yacht Club, can find themselves in unexpected problems. He was briefly grounded by low water while sailing off Point Abino near the Buffalo Canoe Club last year.

"It's an area I had been traditionally able to go through," he said.

Sender said the yacht club prepared for the expected low water levels by dredging its anchorage two years ago. Last year, he said there were few problems, even for the larger sailboats that need 7 1/2 feet of clearance below the boat.

"This year, we're going to have problems with some of our deeper-keeled boats," he said. "We're just keeping an eye on things, and if need be, we'll have to make arrangements in other ports, like Port Colborne, to take care of it."

The Coast Guard, as was the case last year, is urging boaters to pay more attention when they navigate what are normally familiar waters, especially those close to the shoreline.

"When water levels are higher, there tends to be a comfort level," said Lt. Mark Moland. "You need to be cognizant of where those danger areas are. By purchasing a chart from a local marina and taking a boating safety course, you can learn how to navigate properly."

For recreational boaters, the low water levels are mostly an inconvenience. For large cargo ships that haul grain, coal and steel, they mean another bad year.

Glen Nekvasil of the Lakes Carrier Association said U.S.-registered cargo ships along the Great Lakes moved 113 million net tons last year, down 2.1 percent despite the fact that the shipping season had 26 more days than the year before.

"That tells you the water levels and steel imports combined to do a number on us," Nekvasil said. "The loss of water in the lakes is so dramatic. It would have to rain 40 days and 40 nights to solve this any time soon."

For every inch decrease in the lake levels, Nekvasil said cargo haulers lose 270 net tons, which translates into more trips by ships carrying less material.

Less water in the lakes means less water running through the hydroelectric generators the New York Power Authority runs in Niagara Falls and on the St. Lawrence Seaway.

"It's not good news," said Jack Murphy of the power authority. "We notify our customers when we have to cut back on firm commitments. So far, we have had to notify them every month this year."

Customers got some relative good news for June: The cut is only 6.5 percent, compared to 11.1 percent in May, according to Murphy.

The lower lake levels also translate to lower water tables, according to the Army Corps of Engineers' Tony Eberhardt.

"It's sort of a localized problem," he said. "There are a lot of the shore wells along the coast, especially on the Canadian side, and they would be affected."

Those who monitor the lakes say the current low levels are a concern, but they are within the range of normal historical fluctuation.

Low precipitation and high evaporation usually drive down lake levels. Experts don't know if another factor - global warming - is playing any part in the current situation.

"If it is global warming evolving, then yes, the (long-term) lows are expected to be lower, significantly lower," said Gauthier of the Army Corps of Engineers. "Some studies I've seen say at least two feet lower than in the 1930s."

All the historical low-water marks on Lakes Erie and Ontario were established in the 1930s.



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