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Seven-day archi



Rainfall aids lake, shipping

But Superior's level still low

By Scott Thistle
News Tribune staff writer



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Superior still below average

More than 5 inches of rain combined with lots of melting snow to make Lake Superior rise by a record 11 inches in April, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reported Thursday.

But the water is still 6 inches below its long-term average for the beginning of May and is expected to remain low through the summer.

The April increase is a record for any month since 1900, when records were first kept, said Carl Woodruff, a hydrologic engineer at the corps' Great Lakes Hydraulics and Hydrology Office in Detroit. It exceeds the rise of 7 inches in 1948. On average, the lake rises just 3 inches during April, Woodruff said.

The 5.3 inches of rain that fell in the Lake Superior basin in April compares to an average of 1.96 inches, Woodruff said.

"It's really a whopper amount of rain," he said. "But (Lake Superior) will still remain below the (long-term) average level for the rest of the year unless we get substantial precipitation."

The level remains about 6 inches below its long-term average for the beginning of May but is 2 inches higher

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than it was last year at this time.

Especially low are lakes Michigan and Huron, which are 23 inches below their long-term average for the beginning of May, Woodruff said.

The blast of water in Superior won't have much impact on fish populations, said Steve Givings, a fisheries resource specialist with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources in Duluth.

"If it was a smaller lake, it could have some impact," he said, "but the total volume of the lake is so large it really won't have much of an effect at all."

The big boost in water volume is good news to those in the shipping business, who remained cautiously optimistic.

"We still got our fingers crossed, and as far as increasing our draft, we haven't done that yet," said Fred Cummings, marine superintendent for USS Great Lakes Fleet Inc. "It may have come up at a record shot, but it's nothing to beat the drum about yet."

Because other lakes and rivers in the chain where some of the vessels have to travel are below their average depths, ships are still taking on lighter loads.

A deeper lake, even by inches, means ships can carry larger loads, said Ray Skelton, environmental and government affairs director for the Duluth Seaway Port Authority. Especially low is the St. Marys River below the Soo Locks in Michigan, he said.

"Every inch of water on a thousand-footer is worth 300 tons," said Fred Shusterich, the president of Midwest Energy in Superior, which ships coal. "So, 10 inches -- that's 3,000 tons more we could carry."

Heavier loads mean fewer trips for vessels hauling his company's cargo, making each trip more efficient. Because his company has customers on four of the five Great Lakes, more water in any of the lakes is welcome, he said.

"Any lake we can gain on is a good thing, so it's positive, but we still have to wait and see how things go for the remainder of the season," he said.

Scott Thistle covers environmental issues in Northeastern Minnesota and Northwestern Wisconsin. He can be reached weekdays by calling (218) 723-5312 or by e-mailing sthistle@duluthnews.com

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