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Lake Erie water levels expected to keep falling

By JENNI GLENN
Staff writer

Science is starting to reveal what boaters already know: Lake Erie is low, lower than last year and much lower than near record highs of four years ago.

The water level will be about 3 inches lower than it was during last year's boating season, said Roger Gauthier, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Great Lakes hydrologist in Detroit.

The low levels might seem contradictory, considering this winter's record snowfall, but the snow actually contributed to the lake's current conditions, Gauthier said.

As the lake water evaporated, the cold weather turned the moisture into snow, which fell on the city as lake effect snow. Because the precipitation originated in Lake Erie, the snow actually removed water from the lake.

Once the snow melted, most of it was absorbed into the ground or flowed away from the lake. As a result, the water removed by the snow was never replaced. Spring rain can help to make up the deficit, but Gauthier said light rain until May did little to raise the water level.

Currently the water is at 571 feet above sea level, 7 inches below Lake Erie's long-term average level, and Gauthier said he doesn't expect it to rise 2 to 3 inches the way water levels typically do in June because of the lower rainfall. If the lake stays steady this month, the level will be nearly a foot below June's long-term average.

"It's going to stay that level pretty much through the remainder of the boating season," he said.

Gauthier said the water level might drop another 6 inches in the fall.

The low water level already is causing problems for boaters, whose boats can run aground on rocks or damage propellers. So far, Lakeshore Towing



Eric Guerrein, owner of Lake Shore Towing says he has towed four boats that ran aground this season. Erie Times-News photo by Isaac Brekken

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[Services](#) already has towed four boats that ran aground this season, owner Eric Guerrein said.

"We get quite a few boats that are a ways out from shore, but they don't realize how shallow it is," Guerrein said.

Guerrein said the low levels are both "a blessing and a curse" for his business. In similar conditions last year, the company towed 24 boats — damaging propellers on its own craft six times while assisting stranded boaters.

No boats from the [Erie Yacht Club](#) have run aground yet this season, but the marina did some dredging to prepare its berths for boats. General Manager Mike Lynch said the process involved moving some boulders and shale into deeper water.

But because conditions are similar to last year, marinas including the Presque Isle Yacht Club, [Wolverine Park Marina](#) and the North East Marina are not doing much more dredging to prepare for the low water levels.

Some, such as North East Marina, already underwent major dredging last year to make the berths safe and accessible in times of low water levels, but boaters still need to be careful, North East Marina operator Tim Truitt said.

"There's always been hazards under the water, but now they're closer," Truitt said.

What's not closer is the boats to the dock. At the Erie Yacht Club members a few years ago could step off the dock into their boats. The low water levels mean that some members must slide off the dock to safely reach their boats, Lynch said.

Because most of the marinas and launches were built in the past 20 years, the structures were designed for different conditions than the present low water levels, [U.S. Coast Guard](#) Chief Kurt Rugenius said.

"Historically those (past 20 years) have been high years for the lake," Rugenius said. "Now that the water's going down, we're having problems."

Some boat launches in the area cannot be used when the water levels are low. To avoid potential problems, some boaters at [Presque Isle State Park](#) are using the ramp at West Pier Launch rather than the shallow Niagara Launch, Assistant Park Manager David Rutkowski said.

Indirectly, the low water levels also can cause boat engines to overheat, Guerrein said. The shallow water permits more sunlight to reach seaweed. The additional aquatic plant growth increases the likelihood that seaweed will become caught in engines and cause boats to overheat.

While the shallow water might present hazards for boats, the conditions are ideal for owners of bayfront property and beach-goers.

The peninsula beaches will be larger this year because the low water level slows the rate of erosion. The low water level causes smaller waves, which remove less sand from the shore. At Presque Isle State Park, the conditions limited the need to replenish the peninsula beaches this spring.

"The lower levels do mean that we will need less sand brought in," Rutkowski said. "It provides real nice recreational beaches."

For those with bayfront property, the shallow water offers a chance to decide how best to protect against erosion, said Michael Mohr, a U.S. Army Corps of



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Engineers coastal engineer in Buffalo.

"It really makes an ideal time for anyone with structures on the water to examine them and consider any reinforcement they want to do," Mohr said.

Water flow trends throughout the Great Lakes region are causing the lake's low levels, Gauthier said. Lake Huron and Lake Michigan, the major feeder lakes for Lake Erie, currently have the lowest water levels relative to their mean in the Great Lakes. The U.S. Army Corps measurements show the two lakes at a mean level of 577.3 feet above sea level in the past 30 days, 19.2 inches below their long-term average for the month of May.

Although Lake Erie is shallow this year, Gauthier said the conditions are average in comparison to the lake's record low.

"The other salient issue is that, as of today, we are 24 inches above the lowest level recorded," he said. "If people think it's low now, back in 1934 it was 2 feet lower."

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