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**NEWS**

**May rains help stabilize Lake Michigan water level**

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**By John Tunison**

Last month's heavy rains helped stem the tide that some feared would plunge Lake Michigan this year to its lowest level in 37 years.

It wasn't much consolation to Lake Macatawa shoreline resident Jerry Baarman, however. Shallow depths still prevent him from anchoring his 25-foot boat at his dock, near Holland.

Baarman, president of the Lake Macatawa Shoreline Association, has the boat on a trailer.

"There's not even enough water to swim in at places," he said.

Baarman and other lakefront residents say they are grateful that water levels appear to have stabilized after a drop of more than 3 feet over the past four years.

Records from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Detroit show today's Lake Michigan level is only 2 inches below last June. It remains about 10 inches above the all-time low set in 1964.

While that indicates the big lake's slide will not hit the all-time low -- at least this year -- it's also true levels must rise significantly to reach anything approaching normalcy. Lake Michigan is still about 23 inches below its long-term average.

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Roger Gauthier, supervisory hydrologist with the Corps of Engineers, said a wet April in the Lake Superior basin and record rainfall in May in lower Michigan has helped halt the downward trend.

"With the amount of rain we have had, there is an incredibly low probability now of setting a new record low this summer," Gauthier said. "There is no indication of either substantial improvements or worsening."

May rainfall in the Lake Michigan basin was 157 percent of the average while Lake Superior had 136 percent of the average.

Corps of Engineers' data shows Lake Superior is 5 inches higher than it was last year at this time. The rise in Lake Superior helps lakes Michigan and Huron because more water flows into the lower lakes.

Tom DenHerder, manager of the 371-slip Yacht Basin Marina in Ottawa County's Park Township, said he thinks many boaters have adjusted to the low water levels.

"Last year, everybody got over the water-depth issue," he said. "I really think there is going to be more impact this year with the high fuel prices," he said.

With gas close to \$2 a gallon, it could cost owners of large boats several hundred dollars to fill up their tanks. DenHerder has a 46-foot boat with a 400-gallon tank that he figures could cost \$800 to fill.

DenHerder said the low water levels have actually been good for his marina because many shoreline homeowners with docks in shallow water are paying for a slip.

He said Yacht Basin Marina, which only has a handful of slips available, prepared for the low water by dredging the previous two years.

"We had to do a lot less dredging this year," he said.

Meanwhile, Baarman said many Lake Macatawa shoreline homeowners have been forced to rent slips or launch their boats at public launch sites.

He said some homeowners can still keep their boats at dockside, but must push the boat into deeper water before lowering their outboard motors. If they don't, the propellers could get damaged, he said.

"The difficulty factor goes way up," Baarman said.

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