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Wet spring stabilizes lake levels

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Soggy "Yoopers" in April and damp "trolls" in May mean Lake Michigan water levels will remain about the same as last summer _ 10 inches above its all-time low.

Measurements by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration indicate that while the Great Lakes aren't rising, they won't drop to their record lows as some have predicted.

At least not this summer.

"There's only going to be a 2-inch increase over what we were looking at last month," said Roger Gauthier, supervisory hydrologist with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers office in Detroit. "That will bring us to just about the same level as last year. It's a very, very modest improvement."

Lake Michigan is 23 inches below its long-term average.

"Without the rains, the lakes could have gone down to their record lows," said Cynthia Sellinger, physical scientist at NOAA's Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory in Ann Arbor. "But it wasn't enough rain to raise the levels."

Record April rainfall over Lake Superior and heavy rains over the southern Great Lakes should keep Lake Michigan from dipping below last summer's levels.

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It all points to a change in weather patterns that need a closer look, says Sellinger.

Lake Superior was in danger of dropping below its 1926 record low this summer. But thanks to 136 percent more rain than normal in April, Lake Superior rose 11 inches and is now 18 inches above its record low.

Meanwhile, below the Mackinac Bridge where Michigan's "trolls" live, it was the 11th wettest May on record in Muskegon, according the National Weather Service. While Grand Rapids set a record with more than 10 inches of rain, 4.82 inches fell on Muskegon. Muskegon averages 2.6 inches of rain in May.

The rain helped keep lake levels, which had fallen after another mild winter, from dropping even lower. Warm winters mean less spring runoff from snow melt. And without the normal amount of ice cover, the lakes lose more water through evaporation than normal.

"Without severe winters, there's more evaporation and more lake-effect snow," said Sellinger. "That's water that's sucked out of the lake and lost to the system."

The low water levels have already had an impact this shipping season. Lake freighters are carrying lighter loads due to the shallow water.

The impact on recreational boating will be the same this summer as last, says Gauthier. "There will be the same loss of revenue and level of compromise in terms of the ability to use boats."

Water flowing out of Lake Superior and into the southern Great Lakes through the St. Mary's River will help maintain Lake Michigan's level. But at a slow rate.

"There's so much volume, it's like a pinhole in a bathtub," said Gary Fahnenstiel, director of NOAA's Lake Michigan Field Station in Muskegon.

NOAA is expecting average temperatures and rainfall for the summer.

"The summer outlooks are average for temperature and for the precipitation the lakes depend on," said Sellinger. "The rain will keep Lake Michigan from falling and it should behave in a normal manner this summer."

The current water levels are within historical norms for the Great Lakes. "Some would argue that this is a normal variation," said Fahnenstiel. "If we were a foot below the all-time low, that would be very concerning."

The drop of over 3 feet in the last four years bears watching, says Sellinger. "The lakes normally don't rise and fall quickly because they're so large."

The news is not all gloom and doom, says Fahnenstiel. It depends on your perspective.

"Beachfront property owners love it."

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