Earthwatch Radio
University of Wisconsin - Madison

Low Lakes

Program script for Monday, July 30, 2001
By Kathleen Schmitt

Water levels on the Great Lakes are going down, and some people say climate change might be to blame.

Low water levels in the Great Lakes create wonderful beaches for sun worshipers but big problems for ships and wildlife. Right now, water levels on the Great Lakes are low for the fourth year in a row. Until now, most scientists thought low levels were part of a natural cycle of ups and downs, but a federal report suggests that climate change might be part of the current conditions.

Frank Quinn contributed to the report. Quinn is a hydrologist at the Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He says the report used computer models that simulate climate conditions and lake levels decades into the future. One Canadian model predicted that within 30 years, Great Lakes levels could drop by as much as three feet.

Quinn says water levels have been low since the fall of 1997 due to warm temperatures and decreased rain and snowfall. He says levels were also low in the 1930s and 1960s, so current conditions could be part of a natural cycle. He says more time is needed to determine if levels will rise again or remain low for years to come.

> *"Since we've had these types of levels in the past, we feel that there's a high probability that they could be entirely natural. However, they are also consistent with what the Canadian model says could happen to the Great Lakes in the future. But right now, they haven't been low long enough for us to really say that `yes, this is due to climate change.' We will really be looking the remainder of this year and next year, to see if the levels remain low."*

Quinn says if low levels continue into the future, significant changes would occur in the Great Lakes region. He says shipping companies would lose money because they won't be able to carry as much cargo. Also, many wetland areas would dry up and threaten the migratory birds and other animals that depend on them.

Additional Information:

Check current water levels tracked by **U.S. Army Corps of Engineers**

Sources:

U.S. Global Change Research Program report: **"Preparing for a changing climate: The potential consequences of climate variability and change"**

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