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CP Story

Low water level in Great Lakes, seaway and St. Lawrence hurt big shippers

ALLAN SWIFT

MONTREAL (CP) - Low water levels on the St. Lawrence River, its seaway and the Great Lakes are starting to hurt the large commercial shipping industry. No one knows for sure the reason for the disappearing water, which has also afflicted recreational boating and fishing and hurt water-front home and cottage property values.

Most believe the low water of the past two years is just part of a cycle, and it will come back to normal levels. Others see a long-term problem caused by global warming.

But for the moment it has forced Great Lakes vessels to reduce loads, at great cost to their efficiency.

While minimum depths have been maintained at the Port of Montreal and the St. Lawrence Seaway, any further drop would hurt their ability to attract international traffic.

Water has fallen more than a metre below the average for this time of year in the port of Montreal, which handles more transatlantic container traffic than any other North American port.

The water level is near the minimum standard, called chart datum, but the port's chief executive insists the low water has not affected traffic. Last year, however, some ships had to unload some cargo at downstream ports like Trois-Rivieres or Sept-Iles, Que., to complete the trip up-river to Montreal.

"It has not affected traffic one iota," said CEO Dominic Taddeo. "Even in previous years the stories of water levels affecting the port of Montreal were grossly exaggerated.

"We're concerned about it but we have not lost one tonne of cargo. Hopefully, Mother Nature will be good to us and return the situation to normal."

A spokesman for the International Joint Commission, the Canada-U.S. body that oversees water levels in the lakes, the seaway and the whole St. Lawrence, said the board adopted a strategy in June to retain water in Lake Ontario for "critical needs" down the river.

The flow from the lake into the river is controlled by the hydroelectric dam at Cornwall, Ont.

"We're looking at a difficult summer," said Tim McAuley, engineering adviser at the Canadian section of the joint commission.

He said water flows will be increased as needed during the heavier shipping season in the fall, to allow vessels to get into Montreal.

"The board is trying to see to critical needs and to help as much as possible but we cannot bring more rainfall and we can't reduce the evaporation off the lakes," McAuley said.

The worst effects are on the Great Lakes. While Lake Ontario has been kept at just three centimetres below average, lakes Michigan and Huron are down by 57 centimetres, Erie by 28 and Superior by 17.

Ray Johnston, president of the Ottawa-based Chamber of Maritime Commerce, said that for every 2.5 centimetres of reduced water level a ship has to carry 100 tonnes less cargo.

Canadian-registered lakers that normally carry 25,000 to 28,000 tonnes "are forgoing up to 1,500 tonnes of cargo . . . so it's pretty significant."

Some American-registered vessels carry up to 60,000 tonnes, such as those carrying iron ore from Duluth, Mich., to Canadian steel mills, or coal to Detroit power stations.

Those vessels lose 250 tonnes per 2.5 centimetres, "so the impact is even more severe," said Johnston.

McAuley says inland ports like Montreal are sensitive about the issue because of competition.

"The ports of Boston, New York and Halifax, they're pro-actively seeking clients. When there are articles of bad news like 'climate change says water levels will go down on the Great Lakes,' they'll fax them to their clients in Europe," McAuley said.

"We're aware of that sensitivity but still, climate change does not bode very well for the Great Lakes and the majority of models are saying we're going to have lower water levels.

"The levels are always cyclic, but they could cyclically tend towards a lower stage and . . . it's not good news for shipping."

Nicole Trepanier, director of the St. Lawrence Shippers

Association, says the difficulty is mainly for Montreal, since tides are felt as far as Trois-Rivieres, about 100 kilometres northeast of Montreal.

"People have panicked during the past two years over water levels but according to long-term statistics it seems it's a phenomenon that comes by every 30 years," said Trepanier.

The International Joint Commission oversees water levels based on three needs, established in 1909: Municipal water supplies, commercial shipping and hydro energy.

Claude Mailloux, director of SODES, the Quebec-based marine chamber of commerce, said the commission is under pressure to include other criteria like recreational boating, marinas, waterfront property owners and the environment.

The commission is seeking funds from the Canadian and American governments to conduct a major upper Great Lakes study in 2003.

The low water level was blamed for the deaths of 10,000 carp earlier this month on the St. Lawrence.

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