

toledoblade.com®

This is a printer friendly version of an article from www.toledoblade.com

©2001 The Blade. [Privacy and Security Statement](#). By using this service, you accept the terms of our [visitor agreement](#): Please read it.

To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[Back](http://www.toledoblade.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?Site=TO&Date=20020104&Category=NEWS06&ArtNo=101040041&Ref=AR) to: <http://www.toledoblade.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?Site=TO&Date=20020104&Category=NEWS06&ArtNo=101040041&Ref=AR>

Article published January 4, 2002

Concerns deepen at persistent lake level Davis-Besse, others concerned at trend

By [TOM HENRY](#)
BLADE STAFF WRITER

With the Great Lakes at the lowest they've been since the 1960s, western Lake Erie's boating and shipping industries could be in for another rough summer unless the region gets socked by a Buffalo-style blizzard soon.

Even if the lake freezes and snowfall reverts to normal between now and March, as expected, there's no end in sight to the problem, according to scientists at two federal agencies that track the region's water levels, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Army Corps of Engineers.

The potential effect goes beyond weekend fishing trips and cargo hauled here by huge freighters: Akron-based FirstEnergy Corp. acknowledges it has safety-related concerns about the long-term effects that declining lake levels could have on its Davis-Besse nuclear plant in Ottawa County.

In recent weeks, the utility has been contacting scientists from NOAA, the corps, and other agencies with questions about how long the low-water trend could last. The nuclear plant, which is along the Lake Erie shoreline, needs to be assured the water will remain deep enough so that it can continue to draw in thousands of gallons at a time for cooling.

"If it dropped so low we couldn't bring it in, we'd have to shut the plant down," FirstEnergy spokesman Richard Wilkins said yesterday.

He said the utility has discussed the possibility of extending its water intake farther into the lake if the long-term forecast for water levels doesn't improve, although he noted that no such project has gotten beyond an informal discussion stage.

Scientists have said for years that Toledo is in the most fickle part of the Great Lakes - Lake Erie's shallow western basin, where water can drop quickly if stiff winds from the south blow it away from the shoreline.

Compounding the problem are the warm temperatures that have delayed the lake's freezing, leaving the open waters rife to evaporation.

This year, Lake Erie's western basin is weeks behind where it normally would be, as a result of the region's rather mild, snowless winter. It has taken a beating in terms of evaporation. A return to normal temperatures and precipitation this late in the season won't replenish what has been lost, according to NOAA's Cynthia Sellinger and the corps' Roger Gauthier, both hydrologists.

Ms. Sellinger said she was surprised to get a call from Davis-Besse officials a few weeks ago. Most of her

inquiries are from marina operators, fishermen, and those affiliated with the shipping industry.

Davis-Besse operators monitor gauges to make sure the plant has enough cooling water on hand for a safe shutdown in the event of an emergency. Since going on line in 1977, the plant never has had to shut down because of a water shortage, Mr. Wilkins said.

Ms. Sellinger said she recently completed a study that shows lakes Erie, Huron, and Michigan dropped 2.6 feet from 1998 to 2001, one of the most dramatic three-year declines on record.

The Cleveland-based Lakes Carriers Association, which represents the shipping industry, estimates that \$22,000 to \$28,000 of cargo have to be removed from each barge for every inch of water the lakes lose - costs that add up to the millions and typically are passed along to consumers.

The economic effect on the Port of Toledo is hard to gauge, said John Loftus, seaport director for the Toledo-Lucas County Port Authority. "The reality is we are dependent on how Mother Nature is going to run this show. It makes life unpredictable, so don't base your business around high water levels," Mr. Loftus said.

The region's low-water trend could stick around for years, if predictions about global warming come true, Ms. Sellinger said.

The World Meteorological Organization, a United Nations climate agency, has declared 2001 as the Earth's second-warmest on record. The warmest was 1998.

The resulting low water has almost everyone worried, including marina owners who must dredge deeper to keep docks and berths open. "We're all concerned," Joe Ihnat, co-owner of Anchor's Away Marina Corp. in Marblehead, said. "Lake Erie is our main bread and butter, and we need reasonable water depth to take care of our customers."
