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Mild winter threatens Great Lakes' water level

By [Lauren Stanforth](#)
Democrat and Chronicle

(Wednesday, January 9, 2002) -- The majority of the Great Lakes' water levels rose in the past year -- a sign to researchers that a 35-year low period could be reversing.

But a warmer than normal winter, which leads to more lake water evaporation, could mean lower levels down the road, said Roger Gauthier, hydrologist with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Detroit.

"Whatever modest improvements we were seeing are at risk because of how mild the winter is," Gauthier said.

Lake Ontario is currently at an average level, in large part because its level is controlled by the St. Lawrence Seaway.

"I never want to speak too soon about whether things are going well for the interest of land owners," said Greece resident Henry S. Stewart, president of the Lake Ontario South Shore Council. "But at the present time it looks like ... the levels are reasonable."

Lower lake levels are good for land owners because the conditions reveal more beach front, which can also protect their property from storms. But low levels are bad for marinas and the shipping industry, which need higher water to navigate and store boats.



DANESE KENON

Cleveland Institute of Art students Adam LaPorta, left, Andrew Zimbelman, center, and Drew Hood work on a Lake Ontario project at Durand-Eastman Beach in Irondequoit. Researchers worry about the lower water level of many of the Great Lakes, but Lake Ontario is currently at an average level.



COURTESY OF GREEN BAY PRESS GAZETTE

The Whitefish Dunes State Park in Wisconsin has plenty of room this year because of low water levels on Lake Michigan. It is the second year in a row of low water levels. All the Great Lakes are above last year's levels, but the mild winter threatens to erase the edge.

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Ecologically, more study needs to be done on the impact of lower lake levels on animal and plant life, said Joseph C. Makarewicz, biological sciences professor at the State University College at Brockport. But Makarewicz said less water can lead to wetlands moving or dying out - which might have an impact on fish and bird populations.

All of the Great Lakes are above last year's level, with Superior being the highest at 10.8 inches over.

But a warmer than normal winter has kept ice from forming on the lakes -- which means water continues to escape through evaporation.

Gauthier said Lake Ontario, currently at 45 degrees, is nowhere near the freezing point. And temperatures here in November were 6.4 degrees above normal; in Detroit, temperatures were 7.4 degrees above normal.

The seven feet of snow that Buffalo received in late December is largely attributed to the amount of unfrozen lake water that helped generate the lake effect storms.

Gauthier said researchers won't know until at least mid-March what the impact on lake levels will be. By then, most winter storms will have run their course, and the amount of water taken through evaporation and brought back from water run-off will be known.

But if ice cover remains sparse, and lake water is not replaced with water from outside storm systems, the gains the lakes are experiencing now could be erased, Gauthier said. Lake Michigan and Lake Huron are still 14.4 inches below the long-term average; Superior is 3.6 inches below. And the Army Corps of Engineers predicts that Lake Superior, for example, is expected to decline three inches by the end of January.

Meanwhile, Lake Ontario retains the status quo -- exactly meeting the long-term average.

Ontario's resiliency is attributed to its level being controlled by the International St. Lawrence River Board of Control, which regulates how much water is let out of the lake and into the St. Lawrence Seaway.

Conditions have actually been favorable enough that the river board has allowed 1.2 inches of water to be stored on Lake Ontario in case of a drought situation. The control is good news for Lake Ontario users, bad news for users down the St. Lawrence, such as the Port of Montreal, where officials have asked for more water to be let out of the lake.

David Fay, senior water resources engineer with Environment Canada in Cornwall, Ontario, said it's predicted that Lake Ontario will be at average levels again in June, when the lake normally hits its highest level.

"Anybody complaining about the lake levels has done something wrong according to calculating the 100-year average," said Frank Sciremammano, a Rochester Institute of Technology professor and member of the International St. Lawrence River Board of Control. "We're right at the average. We don't know why. But we could get blasted (with more snow) yet."

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