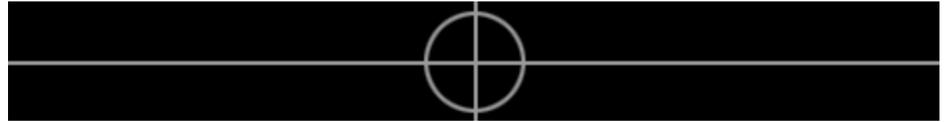




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Great Lakes water levels lowest in 35 years

DETROIT (AP) — Great Lakes water levels are at their lowest point in 35 years, and there's no relief in sight. Lake Ontario's water level has dropped about 25 centimetres since 1997.

Low water means deep trouble for U.S. and Canadian tourism, commercial fishing, shipping and recreational boating industries.

U.S. scientists had hoped lake levels would rise significantly this spring. But that isn't likely to happen because snowfall in some areas is only half the winter average and a protective ice cap hasn't formed over parts of the lakes.

"It's going to be quite similar to last summer," Roger Gauthier, a hydrologist with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Detroit, told the Detroit News today. "If they didn't like it then, they won't like this summer."

Rainfall in 2001 was just above average, and average precipitation is expected this spring. Below-average snowfall, and the lack of an ice layer that curtails evaporation, have prevented the lakes from being replenished.

Water levels in lakes Michigan and Huron have dropped more than 102 centimetres since 1997 and are now



Bernard Weil/Toronto Star

Animal tracks are shown along the shoreline of the Credit River in the fall of 2001.

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Animal tracks head towards an old tire along the dry banks of the Credit River in the fall of 2001.



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35 centimetres below average. Lake Superior is 10 centimetres below the norm; lakes Erie and St. Clair, 13 centimetres. Lake Ontario's water level is mechanically regulated at Massena, N.Y.

Low lake levels are a critical issue in Michigan, which has more than 5,000 kilometres of coastline and 825,000 registered boats, more than any other state. More than 30,000 jobs depend on the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence water transportation system.

Some state and federal political leaders want the government to help those being hurt by seemingly uncontrollable forces of nature.

The Michigan Legislature in 2000 passed a bill allowing marinas to obtain up to \$75,000 in low-interest state loans to dredge around their docks. So far, eight marinas have received loans totalling \$369,000.

Predicting a change in the water level cycle is difficult, Gauthier said earlier this month.

"It could go either way," Gauthier said. But even if temperatures dropped radically for the rest of the winter and spring was very wet, lake levels wouldn't return to average depths by summer, he said.



Bernard Weil/Toronto Star

Docks along the Mississauga shoreline of the Credit River are shown in the fall of 2001.



Bernard Weil/Toronto Star

A paddler guides his way up the dry, narrow channel of the Credit River in the fall of 2001.

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