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Great Lakes levels are on the rise

Democrat and Chronicle staff and wire reports

(March 14, 2002) — Water levels for the Great Lakes this year might be higher than average -- reversing conditions in 2001 that left docks bone dry and harbors shallow -- according to a new assessment by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

On Lake Ontario, water levels will be as much as 5 inches above normal by June, when the lakes typically brim with the most water of the season.

The trend is already evident on Ontario, said Rich Thomas, chief of the corps' water management section in Buffalo.

The lake's historical March average depth is 244.98 feet -- 4 inches lower than the present reading.

Lake level averages are calculated based on the years 1918 to 2000.

"It's good news that we're above average," said Thomas, but he warned that a few months of poor rainfall or melted snow might change the picture.

In January, the corps did not hold out much hope that low water levels in the lakes would ease.

But in a new assessment, the corps said lakes Michigan and Huron should rise about 8 inches from last year, and Erie should increase about 5 inches.

A very rainy fall and average snowpack around the Lake Superior basin this winter should combine for higher lakes come spring, the report said.

"Earlier we were saying that we expected conditions to be about the same as last year, but now we think we'll see some definite improvement," said Keith Kompoltowicz, meteorologist with the corps' Detroit district office.

"This is good news because I've really had some hard times launching my boat at different ramps around the state," said fisherman Greg Reynolds of Anchor Bay, Mich.

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"I've seen more than a few boats hit bottom or a pile of rocks hidden just below the water's surface."

Freighters that carry iron ore to area steel plants also have had trouble.

For each inch the lake went down, shippers had to lighten their load by about 100 metric tons.

With the lakes expected to rise, freighters should be able to carry more weight without fear of running aground.

A 1999 Michigan State University study said Michigan marinas lost about \$30 million that year, mostly because of the high cost of dredging to ease access.

Includes reporting by staff writer Corydon Ireland and The Associated Press.



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