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Local
Nation/World
Vital Statistics

Business

SPORTS

SBT Coverage

ISR Coverage

Sports Talk

OPINION

Viewpoints

Letters

Speak Out

ARTS/LIVING

TV Listings

Lifestyles

Entertainment

SERVICES

Advertise

Archives

Classifieds

Newspapers
in Education

Online Shops

Subscriber
Services

Contact Us

South Bend Tribune

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Great Lakes levels expected to rise

By DAN SHINE
Knight Ridder Newspapers

Boaters, marina owners, shippers and thousands of waterfront dwellers can finally exhale: Water levels in the Great Lakes are expected to rise this summer.

The good news comes after four years of watching levels drop about 4 feet.

Despite the fifth-warmest winter on record, Lakes Michigan and Huron should rise about 8 inches from last year and St. Clair and Erie should increase by about 5 inches, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

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

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

Low lake levels have made some boat ramps useless and turned previously sunken sand bars and rock piles into dangerous obstacles. Even the simple act of getting into a boat from a much higher pier was a leap of faith.

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.

The university also pegged recreational boating industry losses -- to marinas, tourism

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and boat sellers -- at \$50 million because of low water that year.

Van Snider Jr., president of the Michigan Boating Industries Association, said the economy has been more of a factor in boat sales than low lake levels. Boat sales were good, Snider said, even when the lakes were falling.

But "it's nice to see things are improving," Snider said.

Forecasters began the winter optimistic about lake levels rising because of the heavy rainfall in September and October. But above-normal temperatures in November, December, January and February prevented ice from forming on the lakes.

An ice cap prevents evaporation, one of the main reasons for declining lake levels during the past four years. Lakes can lose 1 to 2 inches of water a week from evaporation in fall and winter.

Lack of ice also leads to lake-effect snow, caused by cold air mixing with warmer water that is evaporating. When that snow melts on the land, not all of it returns to the lake.

Last month, precipitation around the Lake Superior, Michigan-Huron and Erie basins was well above average.

And even though this year's Superior basin snowpack is about 10 percent below average, it is better than past winters.

The snowpack provides about 40 percent of Lake Superior's annual water supply. Lakes Michigan and Huron get up to 30 percent of their yearly supply from Superior's snowmelt when it flows down.

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