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Water levels expected to rise in Great Lakes

Even added trickle comes as relief to boaters

Catherine Porter
Staff Reporter

After three years of scraping their hulls along the bottom of the Great Lakes, Ontario boaters will be given a reprieve this summer, Environment Canada reports.

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Although the winter has been bone-dry in Toronto, increased precipitation elsewhere in the province, combined with a wet fall season, will mean that water levels in all the Great Lakes except Lake Superior will be higher than last summer, Environment Canada's Ralph Moulton said.

In lakes Michigan and Huron, water levels are expected to rise 20 centimetres from last summer. And Lake Erie is expected to have an added 12 centimetres.

The increase won't bring levels in these lakes up to the seasonal average. But for cottagers who have been watching their harbours clog over the past three summers, even an added trickle will come as a relief.

Lake Ontario, on the other hand, is expected to rise 5 to 10 centimetres above average summer levels.

"For those people just hitting the bottom of their boat in areas and just barely getting to their docks, there's an extra cushion there," said Moulton, manager of Environment Canada's water level information office in Burlington.

For freighters that transport iron ore to steel plants along the Great Lakes, it will mean extra cargo without a danger of hitting bottom. For every two centimetres the water goes down, shippers have had to lighten their load by about 100 tonnes.

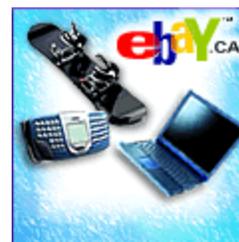
But boaters shouldn't get too ambitious, warns Tom McAuley, engineering adviser at the Canadian section of the International Joint Commission, a Canada-U.S. body that oversees water levels in the lakes and St. Lawrence River system.



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'I wouldn't be really optimistic this year and say the problems are over. There will still be some impact of lower water for boats. But it won't be quite as bad as last year'

Tom McAuley

Engineering adviser for the International Joint Commission

"I wouldn't be really optimistic this year and say the problems are over. There will still be some impact of lower water for boats. But it won't be quite as bad as last year."

Environment Canada's projections are based on an average amount of precipitation in the lake basin this spring and summer, Moulton said.

"Last spring and summer were very dry. If we have another dry period this summer and spring, then levels will be close to the same as last year," he added.

Over the last three years, water levels in lakes Huron, Michigan, Erie and Superior have been dropping far below average levels.

Last year, Lake Huron was on average 176 metres above sea level — half a metre below its average since Environment Canada started taking measurements around 90 years ago.

Although there's some concern that the decreasing levels are the result of climate change, Moulton said they are also part of a natural cycle for the lakes.

"The levels we've seen in Lake Huron for the last couple of years are not record setting. They were lower in the 1960s and 1930s. It's part of a 30-year cycle."

Lake Superior remains at about the same level as last year, about 55 centimetres below the summer average.

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