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Thursday, June 20, 2002

On the rise

By FRED WOODHAMS

Times Herald

Breaking the trend of the past few years, water levels in the Great Lakes have rebounded this year from near-historic lows.

The rising water levels mean boaters won't need to jump as far out from the docks to reach their vessels, and area marina owners will see improved profits.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Detroit District reports the Great Lakes are higher than last year's levels but still down from their long-term averages.

Levels improving

As the Corps of Engineers reported earlier this month, Lake St. Clair is 4 inches below average but 8 inches higher than 2001 at this time; lakes Michigan and Huron are 12 inches below average but 9 inches higher than last year; and Lake Erie, which has reached its long-term average, is 9 inches higher than 2001.

Also, Lake Superior is 5 inches below average and an inch higher than last year at this time, and Lake Ontario is 11 inches above its long-term average and 12 inches higher than 2001.

John Love, a physical scientist with the Corps of Engineers Detroit District,



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HEADING IN: Debbie Calnan walks around the boat launch at the St. Clair Municipal Marina after a day of boating with her friend, Steve Achatz, on his 1986 Sea Ray Seville. Both Calnan and Achatz are from Casco Township.



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MAKING WAVES: Richie Kaminski, 12, left, his brother Jordie, 11, and their father Rich Kaminski, all of China Township, move their 18-foot powerboat from the boat launch at the St. Clair Municipal Marina.

ONLINE

DETAILS ON LAKE LEVELS

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said the corps expects Lake Huron to continue to rise through August and Lake St. Clair to level off by July. The Corps of Engineers releases lake-level figures each Thursday.

"The lakes have been rising, and you can attribute that to better- than- average rainfall," he said.

However, Love said the rising levels this year don't necessarily mean continued improvement next year. Keeping the momentum means the area needs a winter more liked by skiers than drivers, he said.

"Conditions are improving, but we still need a good, solid winter," Love said.

Water levels dropped during years of less precipitation and because of recent years where less ice cover on the lakes allowed for more evaporation.

Boats may stay put

As someone who lives on a boat at the Bridge Harbour Marina in Port Huron Township, Guy Groomes said low water levels may mean changing travel plans.

He and his wife may not leave the area for Florida or elsewhere in the South because they can't move as freely in their 44-foot motor boat.

"If they didn't come up this year, we wouldn't even have the boat in (here)," he said.

Groomes said he also couldn't use nautical charts because of the low water levels. Instead, he checks the levels online.

"There's a lot of areas that weren't a problem, but now they are," he said.

Affect on marinas

Some marina operators said low water levels in previous years didn't cause a huge financial blow but did require expensive dredging to ensure boaters could access the slips.

Some also noticed a drop in transient boaters and sailboats in general, which require a deeper draft than motor boats because of their keels.

At the 100-slip Port Sanilac Marina, operators had to buy new dredging equipment, employee Cindy McAfee said.

"We needed a bigger excavator," she said.

The marina spent more than \$60,000 for the excavator and related equipment to remove the silt and clay at the bottom. Because of its larger size, the excavator required a new, larger barge to carry it and a dump truck.

"Luckily, the water is up this year," she said.

The St. Clair Boat Harbor did not need to dredge this year after spending about \$50,000 in 2001 on dredging, assistant harbormaster Deanna Slanec said.

The increased water levels also have made life easier on boaters, who can access and fuel their boats more readily.

"This year, it's really helped us out a lot," Slanec said.

m You can call reporter Fred Woodhams at (810) 989-6258.

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