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Weather lapping up lakes

Great Lakes near record lows; dry spell continues

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Last Updated: Feb. 27, 2003

The Great Lakes could spend this summer at their lowest levels since 1964.

With lake levels already down, the Great Lakes are expected to keep receding this year because of lingering conditions from El Nino, a weather pattern that could usher in warmer and drier weather across the region through the summer.

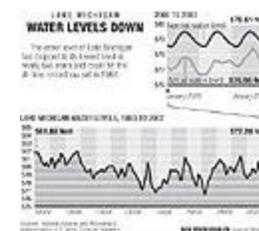
Lower lake levels would expose larger swaths of beach. The situation could also stem some shore land erosion that - just a few years ago - had some homeowners along Lake Michigan scurrying to protect their properties.

But lower lake levels would hurt the shipping industry because boats would have to lighten their loads, and some harbors and yacht clubs would need dredging.

Also, less water in the big lakes could sharpen debate over who uses Great Lakes water and for what purposes.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers recently offered its first glimpse of what it expects Great Lakes levels to reach by the middle of summer.

Lake Michigan



Graphic/Bob Veierstahler Water Levels Down

Unusual?

Although the depth variations can have widespread consequences, they are a normal part of a shore land ecosystem, according to Vicki Harris, a Sea Grant Institute scientist.

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By July, all of the lakes are expected to be at or below their levels of 2001, which were the lowest since the record in 1964. The Corps predicts that Lake Michigan will peak this summer at a level ranging from six inches above to two inches below its high mark in 2001.

"The big difference this year is El Nino," said Philip Keillor, coastal engineering specialist for the University of Wisconsin Sea Grant Institute. "Dry conditions are predicted, and we don't see any relief."

With little rain last fall and lower-than-normal snowfall so far this winter, El Nino's warm and dry ways mean the lakes are not expected to capture enough precipitation, Keillor said.

Minimal ice cover and several bursts of cold, dry weather this winter literally sucked up warmer surface water in the lakes through evaporation, according to the Army Corps of Engineers. Dry soil conditions will absorb melted snow and rainwater more than normal this spring, leaving less water to replenish lakes, the corps said.

Boat owners worried

The near-record lows are creating problems for Great Lakes shippers as well as recreational boaters.

The South Milwaukee Yacht Club caters to powerboats and tries to keep 6 feet of depth in the harbor to accommodate its biggest boats, which need 4 feet of draft.

"We are obviously very concerned about not having enough lake water levels," said Tom Schulz, commodore of the 95-slip club.

Schulz expected to spend at least \$40,000 for dredging the mouth of the harbor this year.

But for the Port of Milwaukee, dredging is not an option because it could harm the foundations of dock walls, according to Larry Sullivan, chief engineer at the port.

The water level in the harbor is within an inch of its minimum depth, so some ships carrying coal, salt and stone and other commodities might not be able to enter the harbor this year. Others will be forced to carry less cargo, Sullivan said.

Milwaukee's situation is happening all over the Great Lakes, said Glen G. Nekvasil, for the Lake Carriers' Association in Cleveland.

Great Lakes vessels have to lose 70 to 270 tons of cargo for each inch they must lighten their load, and that raises operating costs, Nekvasil said.

"What we have to understand is that this is a problem, and there's nothing you can do about it," he said.

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The Lake Carriers' Association says low lake levels underscore the need for dredging in some harbors.

"We have to make sure that we do our best to protect our water," Nekvasil said.

On that point, Cameron Davis, executive director of the Lake Michigan Federation, agreed.

There have been failed attempts in the past to export Great Lakes water out of the basin, in part because such deals were not economical.

"But as demand for water increases, those economies might not continue to work in favor of the Great Lakes," Davis said.

Communities close to Lake Michigan that use well water are beginning to consider the lake as a source of drinking water. Waukesha, New Berlin and Germantown are local examples.

Davis' group is not opposed to such uses. But better standards need to be written so the governing body over such decisions, the Council of Great Lakes Governors, can decide fairly in the future, he said.

Some good news

One advantage of the low water levels is that those living along the lake who battled shoreline erosion during the 1990s don't have much to worry about now.

Back in 1993, owners of large homes in Whitefish Bay were seeking permits to dump soil on the property to shore up their bluffs over Lake Michigan. With lower water levels, that's not happening today.

"I've worked here for three years, and there have been no requests for shore land erosion permits," said Joel Jaster, the village building inspector.

The low water also means some recovery of wetlands is possible, and some shore land birds and animals also might have more habitat, said Vicki Harris, water quality and habitat restoration specialist for the Sea Grant Institute.

A version of this story appeared in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on Feb. 28, 2003.

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