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## Low water levels anticipated on Great Lakes

MIKE TYREE  
Associated Press

**TRAVERSE CITY, Mich.** - Marina owner Steve Porter doesn't sound optimistic as he watches Great Lakes water levels ebb toward record lows.

Since last summer, the Au Sable River is down 18 to 20 inches where it flows by Porter's 28-slip marina near Oscoda on Lake Huron. He fears he'll lose access to six slips and thousands in rental fees if spring rains don't boost the water level by 15 inches.

"Every day, customers call up and ask if we're going to have enough water to put their boat in," Porter said. "I hate to be so negative, but if we don't get it in the next three weeks, I'll lose three grand."

The story's the same at lakefront communities across the state, where high water marks on piers and breakwalls rest two or more feet above the current water line. On inland lakes, receding water has exposed stretches of former lake bottom and left docks high and dry.

Experts say a four-year trend could result in levels nudging to within seven to nine inches of 1964's record lows.

Winter snowfall didn't amount to much and no one's predicting heavy spring rains.

"Most of the snowfall we got this year was lake effect," said Dave Petrovich, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Marquette. "Water from the snowpack going into Lake Superior is not going to help much."

Precipitation in northern Minnesota and southern Ontario also are well below normal and can't be counted on to supply Lake Superior, Petrovich said.

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Barney Pero and his wife Jodie operate a boat launch, storage and haul-out business on the Black River at the Lake Michigan port of South Haven. The water's too low for boaters to launch from trailers, so they're operating a hoist to swing boats into the river.

Customers with large watercraft, especially sailboats, are shying away from the skinny water and river obstacles that could require hefty repair bills, Barney Pero said. Increasingly, boaters are staying home.

"If it's not fun, they don't do it," Pero said.

Lake Superior is expected to drop nine to 10 inches from last year's levels, while forecasters expect lakes Michigan and Huron to fall nine to 12 inches below last year's levels - some 23 to 25 inches lower than median levels, said Cynthia Sellinger, a hydrologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Great Lakes Environmental Research lab.

Lake Erie likely will be nine to 14 inches below last year's mark, Sellinger said.

"The state of Michigan has been in a drought, a severe to moderate drought, but mostly severe," Sellinger said. It may take years of above average precipitation to restore median levels, she said.

Indeed, dry conditions are so pronounced that studies along the southern reaches of Lake Erie discovered that aquifers and wells in the region are lapping up Erie water, a rare occurrence, Sellinger said.

Sellinger said there's no guarantee water levels will rise anytime soon, despite the notion that the Great Lakes are at the bottom of a high-low cycle.

"I think a lot of people want to believe in cycles," she said. "They look pretty credible, but the Great Lakes have been around for 14,000 years. Our records are not even a dot in (time) to look at trends."

Water levels in the Great Lakes are closely related, with Lake Superior serving as the feeder basin. A recent survey of Lake Superior water levels by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers hints at near-record lows this year.

Superior usually loses a foot of water between July and February; this year, studies showed lake levels dropped two feet, said Marie Strum, Army Corps water resources engineer.

"All the Great Lakes are going to be below average and (projects) to be below average through the summer," Strum said.

That's not good news for boat dealers, already anxious because of

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the faltering economy and war in Iraq.

"There's still traffic coming through, but it's an item that's a concern, no question about it," said Kevin Carney, controller at Grand Bay Marine in Traverse City, where the waterline currently extends well into East and West Grand Traverse Bay.

The shrinking water table raises suspicion among frustrated business owners like Porter and Pero, who say rumors abound of man-made water diversions, water sales and engineering mistakes.

"I hear all sorts of stories," Porter said. "They're selling our water, somebody made a mistake and diverted too much through Niagara Falls, they changed the direction of a river running into Lake Superior."

Strum, of the Army Corps, says the problem isn't man-made.

"They think it must be some sinister reason, but it's precipitation, climate," she said. "We're in a very long period (of drought) over the last four years that resulted in low levels."

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