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- [CyberSurveys](#)
- [Horoscope](#)
- [Lottery](#)
- [Michigan's Best](#)
- [Weather](#)
- [Staff](#)

**FORUMS**

- [News Talk](#)
- [Autos Talk](#)
- [Big 10 Talk](#)
- [High Schools](#)
- [Lions Talk](#)
- [Pistons Talk](#)
- [Wings Talk](#)
- [Tech Talk](#)
- [Tiger Talk](#)
- [Weight-loss](#)

**NEWS**

- [Autos](#)
- ▶ [Insider](#)
- ▶ [Auto Show](#)
- ▶ [Consumer](#)
- ▶ [Joyrides](#)
- [Business](#)
- ▶ [Careers](#)
- ▶ [Money & Life](#)
- [Census](#)
- [Columnists](#)
- [Commuting](#)
- [Detroit History](#)
- [Editorials](#)
- [Metro / State](#)
- ▶ [Livingston](#)
- ▶ [Macomb](#)
- ▶ [Oakland](#)
- ▶ [Wayne](#)
- ▶ [On Detroit](#)
- [Nation / World](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- ▶ [Death Notices](#)
- [Politics / Govt.](#)

Tuesday, May 6, 2003



David Guralnick / The Detroit News

Despite low water levels, 92 percent of the boat slips at Belle Maer Harbor in Harrison Township have been rented.

## Boating season thrives despite low lake levels

Activity brings in millions to Macomb  
By Tim Keenan / Special to The Detroit News

### HARRISON TOWNSHIP --

Despite water levels on Lake St. Clair that are a foot-and-a-half below average, Macomb County marinas from Harrison Township to St. Clair Shores are doing booming business.

That's because experienced boaters are shrugging off the difficulties they're facing in trying to get to open water.

"The water has been low," said Mike Ufford, a Chesterfield Township banker who keeps his 30-foot Four



David Guralnick / The Detroit News

Pat O'Connell of Rochester Hills spent \$3,000 for a slip this season to dock his 33-foot powerboat at Belle Maer.

### Water levels drop

Here's an annual measurement of inches above or below Lake St. Clair's long-term average of 574.24 feet above sea level:

2003     -16 to -17 inches\*

### Macomb County

- [Macomb County index for Tuesday, May 6, 2003](#)
- [Boating season thrives despite low lake levels](#)
- [Weather buoys business](#)
- [New Baltimore supports new court site](#)
- [Macomb Briefs](#)
- [Macomb People in the news](#)
- [Macomb week ahead](#)
- [Students cheer for science](#)
- [Contest combines teamwork, academics](#)
- [Across Macomb County](#)
- [Motorist not guilty of killing road worker](#)
- [Dow to dredge St. Clair River](#)
- [Agency finishes cleanup of canals](#)
- [Bridge openings targeted for Sept.](#)
- [Lenox landfill to store ash](#)
- [Mount Clemens ends trash deal](#)
- [Sterling Heights explores gag order](#)

### Sections for this date

Tuesday, May 6, 2003

[Real Estate](#)  
[Religion](#)  
[Schools](#)  
[Special Reports](#)  
[Technology](#)

**SPORTS**

[Sports Insider](#)  
▶ [Lions/NFL](#)  
▶ [Red Wings/NHL](#)  
▶ [Pistons/NBA](#)  
▶ [Shock/WNBA](#)  
▶ [Tigers/Baseball](#)  
▶ [MSU](#)  
▶ [U-M](#)  
[More Colleges](#)  
[Golf Guide](#)  
[High Schools](#)  
[Motor Sports](#)  
[Outdoors](#)  
[More Sports](#)  
[Scoreboards](#)

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▶ [Movie Finder](#)  
▶ [Restaurants](#)  
▶ [TV Listings](#)  
[Crossword](#)

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▶ [Hunt & Fish](#)  
▶ [On the Water](#)  
▶ [Recreation](#)

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▶ [Eats & Drinks](#)  
▶ [Recipe Box](#)  
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[Improvement](#)  
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▶ [Home Tech](#)  
▶ [Wine Report](#)

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[Red Wings](#)  
[Lions](#)  
[Autos](#)  
[Joyrides](#)

Winns cabin cruiser at Belle Maer Harbor in Harrison Township. "But it doesn't matter how low the water is. If you have a chart and aren't a moron, you won't have a problem." Still, the shrinking lake levels could imperil a local boating industry that, when healthy, is worth millions of dollars to the Macomb County economy, from St. Clair Shores to north of Selfridge Air National Guard Base.

The dropped levels forecast by the Great Lakes Research Laboratory and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers come amid other challenges for Macomb boaters, including fluctuating fuel prices and iffy weather. Overcoming these problems is imperative to keeping Macomb's economy afloat, said Don Morandini, deputy director of Macomb County's Planning and Economic Development Department. His most recent economic analysis shows Macomb County has 30 boat dealers employing 294 people, with an estimated annual payroll of \$12 million. Viewed in a national context, the probability for success is great. "Boating is on the rise" nationwide, said Nancy Nisselbaum, executive editor of Boating magazine. "It entices people all the time. It's still a strong industry. Americans still love the form of escape and the family time that boating offers."

The numbers prove it: 852,400 boats were sold in 2002, down from 881,800 in 2001, according to the National Marine Manufacturers Association. Plus, more than \$30.3 billion was spent nationally last year on new boats, used boats, outboard motors, inboard engines, trailers and other boating accessories.

**Starting strong**

Macomb's boating season is starting strong, based on boat slip rentals. And the potential for continued growth is there, as Michigan continues to rank first nationally in boat registrations. In both 2000 and 2001, the state registered more than 1 million boats.

At Belle Maer Harbor in Harrison Township, 836 boat slips have been rented. That's 92 percent of capacity, owner Eric Foster said.

"We're not really concerned (about the water level)," Foster said. "We dredged three years ago (an \$800,000 project), and haven't had a problem."

The water level can help or hurt a boating season, said Cynthia Sallinger, a hydrologist at the Great Lakes Research Laboratory in Ann Arbor. She expects Lake St. Clair to be 17 inches below average through fall.

The main impact of low water levels is people getting in and out of their boat slips, Sallinger said.

"Once they get out, they're OK," she said. "The big freighters are having some problems navigating in these conditions, but not boaters." Michigan's receding lake levels will eventually mean higher prices for products that travel by freighter, such as salt.

2002	-6 inches
2001	-10 inches
2000	-8 inches
1999	-2 inches
1998	+15 inches
1997	+24 inches
1996	+9 inches
1995	+7 inches

\*projected

Source: Great Lakes Research Laboratory

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"For every inch of water (the shippers don't have), they have to carry 100 less tons. So if we're down eight, nine, 10 inches, we're looking at 1,000 tons (less)," said Dean Haen, port director of the Port of Green Bay, which gets its salt from Detroit freighters. "That's 7 percent less cargo per ship."

But in Macomb County, things are looking up. Marinas, restaurants and mom-and-pop party stores rely heavily on the boating industry. Things are good right now at places such as the Hideaway Harbor in Harrison Township, which has rented out its 100 boat slips. No surprise, said harbor manager Dawn Velger.

"We sell out every year," she said.

Boca Grande Marina, on the Clinton River in Harrison Township, has rented 44 of its 56 boat slips, said owner Tom Harvey. Water levels aren't worrying his customers.

"There's plenty of water," Harvey said.

Pat O'Connell, 49, a salesman for an automotive supplier from Rochester Hills, spent \$3,000 for a slip this season to dock his 33-foot Larson powerboat at Belle Maer. He's optimistic water levels will not affect his boating habits.

"Water levels are supposed to be OK," O'Connell said.

#### **Weather concerns**

After low water levels, "the weather is the second-biggest variable" to having a successful boating season in Macomb, said Mike LeFevre, owner of Jack's Waterfront Restaurant in St. Clair Shores. "Last year was a fabulous year because there was only one full weekend of rain."

"Weather dictates everything," said Steve Duffy, owner of Duffy's Landing, a Harrison Township convenience store and fuel station for boaters. "If it's warm and sunny, you're jammed."

Duffy said summer 1998 was awful because it was rainy.

"You couldn't give fuel away," he said. That year, the lake level was 15 inches above average.

This year, "gas prices are coming down," Duffy said. "We'll probably have lower fuel costs than last year, so we expect fuel prices to be an advantage."

Andiamo's Lakefront Bistro in St. Clair Shores doubles its business during boating season. But that business isn't tied to how many boats cruise in from Lake St. Clair.

"We don't have a lot of slip space," said Gina Venta, an Andiamo's manager. "People pretty much come to Andiamo's by car."

*Tim Keenan is a Metro Detroit free-lance writer.*

[▶ Previous Story](#)   [▶ Next Story](#)