US Army Corps
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North Central Division

Great Lakes Levels Update No. 38 September 2, 1988

The biggest news to report this month is the record high(!) rainfall on Lake Superior's basin in August. Based on preliminary reports, about 7 inches of rain fell, over twice the average, and about 1-1/2 inches more than the previous record of August 1959. Lake Erie's basin received about 25% above average rainfall in August, but is still about 5 inches behind in total 1988 precipitation. Lakes Michigan-Huron rainfall was about 45% above average in August; they are now behind about 2-1/2 inches in total 1988 precipitation. Lake Ontario's basin received about 5% below average rainfall in August and its total 1988 precipitation is about 3 inches behind average. Because of Lake Superior's record rains, the total Great Lakes basin rainfall in August was above average;the 1988 total is still about 2 inches behind average.

The 30-day National Weather Service outlook is for below average temperatures basin-wide in September; rainfall is expected to total near average. The 90-day September-November) outlook is for near-average temperatures basin-wide, except for the Lake Erie basin (which is expected to be above average in temperature); precipitation is expected to total above average on the Lakes Michigan-Huron and Erie basins and near average on the Lakes Superior and Ontario basins.

With the record rainfall on the Superior basin, the lake level rose sharply, ending the month about 5-1/2 inches higher than at the beginning of the month. All the other Lakes' levels fell in August: Lakes Michigan-Huron and St. Clair about 2-2/3 inches; Lake Erie about 4 inches; and, Lake Ontario about 4-1/2 inches. The monthly average levels for Lakes Erie and St. Clair were both about 2 inches above long-term average; all other lakes were below the August long-term average.

There has been a dramatic drop in the Lakes Michigan-Huron levels; the record monthly mean of 581.6 feet was in October 1986. In the 22 months since, the levels have dropped 3 feet. Looking at the record, the 22 months of July 1929 to May 1931 saw Lakes Michigan-Huron levels drop even further, by a total of about 3.3 feet.

As a consequence of the sharp increase in Lake Superior's level, its outflow for September will be increased from the 55,000 cfs minimum to 70,000 cfs. All of the flow increase will be achieved by increasing the flow through the hydropower plants.

Lake Superior's level is expected to be nearly steady in September while all of the other Lakes' levels continue to drop.

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From time to time we have been reporting on the International Joint Commission's Reference Study on Fluctuating Water Levels. In that regard, a Public Forum on the Reference will be held Saturday, October 22. Ten sites around the Great Lakes basin will be linked by satellite during the Forum. The format will include an initial television broadcast with presentations by key study participants. There will be an opportunity for the groups at each site to direct questions to the study participants. The ten sites are: Duluth,Minnesota; Sault Ste. Marie and Owen Sound, Ontario; Chicago; Windsor and Oakville, Ontario; Toledo, Ohio; Buffalo and Potsdam, New York; and Montreal. Further details will be provided in next month's update letter.

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