

2007 WATER LEVELS

Lake Superior began 2007 nearly 1½ foot below its long term average (“LTA”). That was a harbinger of things to come. In August and September, Superior fell to new historical lows, and so broke records that dated back to 1926. A rainy fall helped a bit, but Superior still ended the year 12 inches below LTA.

Lake Michigan/Huron, like Superior, was also in one of its longest stretches of below average water levels and so began the year 13 inches below LTA. The situation got progressively worse. By June, Michigan/Huron was 19 inches below LTA. Come December, the water level was 27 inches below LTA.

Although Lake Erie began the year 13 inches above LTA, by May, the Lake was only 2 inches on the plus side. By year’s end, Erie was 5 inches above LTA.

Lake Ontario followed in Lake Erie’s footsteps, starting the year nicely above LTA (17 inches), then slumped in the summer (only 2 inches above LTA), and then rallied to end the year 8 inches on the plus side.

IMPACTS OF DREDGING CRISIS ON COMMERCIAL NAVIGATION

LCA’s members’ vessels carry anywhere from 50 to 267 net tons of cargo for each inch of loaded draft and, when harbor and channel conditions permit, load to drafts that range from 19 to 28 feet or more. (Some of the largest vessels have loadlines that allow for drafts of 30 feet or deeper, something currently unattainable given the project depth in the connecting channels and most ports.) However, the decades-long dredging crisis has dramatically affected waterborne commerce. The table below uses select ports to illustrate how lack of dredging, coupled with fluctuations in water levels, has affected Great Lakes shipping in recent years. System-wide, it is estimated that three of every four cargos LCA members have carried in the past 5 years represented less than full loads.

COMPARISON OF LARGEST CARGOS IN VESSELS OF COMPARABLE SIZES CALENDAR YEARS 2002-2007 AND RECORD CARGO

(net tons)

PORT	COMMODITY	LARGEST CARGO						RECORD CARGO
		2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	
Two Harbors, MN	Iron Ore	67,118	64,860	67,645	66,498	66,259	65,186	70,987
Escanaba, MI*	Iron Ore	67,643	64,244	65,464	64,493	66,457	65,717	76,322
Superior, WI	Coal (Head-of-Lakes)	67,258	64,831	67,531	66,735	66,429	65,386	70,903
Presque Isle, MI**	Limestone	33,123	30,346	34,557	33,239	34,623	34,442	35,457
Alpena, MI***	Cement	16,696	15,927	16,662	16,106	15,678	15,682	17,740

* The all-time record out of Escanaba is 81,033 tons in 1986, but that is the only time a vessel has ever actually loaded even close to 34 feet.

** 1,000-footers rarely carry limestone. The vessel used to benchmark Presque Isle, the self-unloading barge Great Lakes Trader, is 740 feet long.

*** Due to the capacity of storage silos, cement moves in comparatively small cargos. The vessel used to gauge loadings at Alpena, the self-unloading barge Integrity, is 460 feet long.