

2012 WATER LEVELS

Lake Superior was below its Long Term Average (“LTA”) for all of 2012, and in fact, has now been below LTA for 13 consecutive years, or the longest stretch on record. The Lake was below chart datum for nearly the entire year; water levels rose above chart datum only in July and August.

Lake Michigan-Huron (considered one body of water hydraulically because of the connection at the Straits of Mackinac) was likewise below LTA for all of 2012, and set a new record low in December.

Lake Erie lost 22 inches of water over the course of 2012 and never experienced its normal seasonal rise that should begin in March and extend into May.

Lake Ontario fared only slightly better, losing 17 inches over the course of the year.

Mother Nature was to blame for the plunging water levels. 2012 was a very warm and dry year. There was virtually no snowpack, so the spring runoff had a negligible impact on water levels.

Precipitation during the spring and summer was well below average. The warm summer and fall produced very high evaporation rates. In short, drought-like conditions prevailed.

IMPACTS OF DREDGING CRISIS AND DROUGHT ON LCA MEMBERS

The vessels enrolled in LCA carry anywhere from 50 to 267 tons of cargo for each inch of loaded draft and, when harbor and channel conditions permit, load to drafts that range from 19 to slightly more than 34 feet. However, the decades-long dredging crisis, coupled with 2012’s drought, has dramatically affected waterborne commerce. The table below uses select ports to illustrate how lack of dredging, coupled with variations in water levels, has affected LCA members in recent years. They estimate that system-wide, three out of every four cargos LCA members have carried in the past 5 years represent less than full loads.

COMPARISON OF LARGEST CARGOS IN VESSELS OF COMPARABLE SIZES CALENDAR YEARS 2006-2011 AND RECORD CARGO

(net tons)

PORT	COMMODITY	LARGEST CARGO						RECORD CARGO
		2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	
Two Harbors, MN	Iron Ore	65,186	67,392	68,029	65,630	66,500	64,455	70,987
Escanaba, MI*	Iron Ore	65,717	67,451	70,040	66,102	69,106	66,876	81,033
Superior, WI	Coal (Head-of-Lakes)	64,504	67,799	68,541	66,265	67,205	65,787	70,903
Presque Isle, MI**	Limestone	34,442	34,442	35,457	34,563	34,163	32,422	35,457
Alpena, MI***	Cement	15,682	16,032	16,109	15,900	15,025	15,278	17,740

* Loaded in 1986, a time of extremely high water.

** 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 Alpena, the self-unloading barge INTEGRITY, is 460 feet long.