

# Seneca Lake Level – Problem Statement

“The natural beauty of the Finger Lakes region attracts approximately 22 million tourists annually. The tourism generates over \$2 billion annually with significant growth projected for the immediate future. Water-based recreation, sport fisheries, wildlife habitat, and a diverse industrial and agricultural sector, that includes a renowned wine and grape industry, comprise the important economic, social, ecological and occasionally competing environmental attributes of the Finger Lakes Region.”<sup>1</sup>

During 2008 and into 2009, the Seneca Lake water level was extremely low, causing financial hardships, health and safety issues, and endangering the wildlife habitat and fishing. If this problem is not addressed soon, it will have a strong negative impact on local residents, communities and tourism.

Specific impacts of low lake level include:

- Drinking water – many residents of the lake depend upon shore wells for drinking water; when the lake level gets sufficiently low, these wells no longer function.
- Fish and wildlife
  - Negative impact on the littoral zone (specific definitions vary – but in general, the portion of the lake that is less than 15 feet in depth); this zone is home to most of the aquatic plant life – both rooted and floating – and is the spawning and feeding area for lake trout, bass and pan fish. (Geneva is billed as the Lake Trout Capital of the World)
  - Attached wetlands dry up as the lake level drops
  - Reptiles and amphibians that burrow into the earth under the water die as the depth of the water decreases and can no longer insulate them from the cold.
- Marinas experience lost revenue, additional work, safety issues
  - Marinas are forced to turn away business when they can no longer launch boats
  - Unable to bring fixed keel sailboats in
  - Some report having to dredge in order to bring even small boats in and being forced to move lifts to deeper water
  - Marinas report safety issues in safely moving passengers from boats to the docks
  - One marina reported frozen water lines that have to be manually thawed when the water level is too low
- Residents – low water level has significant impact on lake residents:
  - Unable to get boats in and out of lifts
  - Damaged engine and drive components and hull
  - Foundation to lake walls exposed to water and ice causing permanent damage.
- Other
  - Substantial dredging along the Seneca River – Seneca/Cayuga canal system to maintain published depths in nautical charts and navigation aids.
  - Lower levels expose and accumulate decaying macrophytes, and the resulting slimy mass is unsightly, unpleasant to walk through and emits a strong odor.
  - Submerged boulders become closer to the surface, exposing boating enthusiasts to damage from unseen objects.
  - Lower water will cause additional erosion and down-cutting of existing stream channels supplying additional sediments and nutrients to the lake aggravating an already significant nutrient/sediment loading problem in Seneca lake, and aggravating slope stability / landslide problems along the lower reaches of the streams that enter the lake.

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