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September 11, 2005

## A few degrees of separation

### Project seeks to quantify weather's effect on business

By **BILL O'BRIEN**  
Record-Eagle business editor

TRAVERSE CITY -- It doesn't take a genius to know that good weather typically means good times for the tourism industry in northwest Michigan.

But a group of very smart people are working to specifically quantify how the weather impacts the state's \$16 billion-a-year tourism industry.

The Pileus Project started two years ago as part of a comprehensive four-year study funded by the Environmental Protection Agency to gauge the weather's effect on two major Michigan industries -- tourism and agriculture. The project's name comes from the pileus cloud, which appears as a cap over cumulonimbus clouds and is a common sight in the summer months.

Researchers want to develop easy access to weather data so those in the tourism industry can develop better tourism-traffic estimates based on various weather conditions. The information can be used by campground and canoe livery owners, convention and visitor bureau organizations and special event organizers to better estimate the weather's impact on their operations.

Tom Kern, executive director of the National Cherry Festival, which enjoys its greatest success in good weather, said such information would help organizers better plan and schedule events.

"It would be very helpful to special events across the state," he said. "Right now a lot of the information we have is anecdotal, but not necessarily empirical."

The Pileus Project brings together some of the state's top researchers in tourism, agriculture and meteorology. They worked with representatives of several sections of both industries, including golf and ski resorts, tart cherry and other agriculture producers, and reviewed vast amounts of historical climate and weather data.

"Basically, what we've learned is that within the parameter of 10 degrees Fahrenheit or so, which covers the normal daily highs

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within a given summer, that a 1 degree Fahrenheit increase in a day's high temperature generates 1 percent more traffic on Michigan's roads," said Lori Langone. She's a research specialist with the Travel, Tourism and Recreation Resource Center at Michigan State University, which is working with the EPA on the project.

"Conversely, a 1 degree decrease in a day's high temperature generates 1 percent less traffic," she said.

The summer of 2004, for example, was about 4 degrees below normal in Michigan, which would correlate to a 4 percent drop in tourism traffic on state roads.

"And that is pretty much what happened last summer," Linguine said.

Spreading that theory over a key summer holiday like July 4, researchers estimate that a "very cool" day with a high temperature of 64 degrees would generate almost 8,600 vehicles along U. S. 127 north of Clare(\*) -- a main freeway to northern Michigan.

An "average" July 4 temperature of 78 degrees would generate almost 9,300 vehicles on the same highway, researchers said, while a "very warm" day of 92 degrees would produce more than 10,000 vehicles -- an 8.3 percent increase from an average day.

"Other than several leisure variables, including holidays and weekends, temperature is the largest single factor that we have identified that impacts tourism traffic volume," Langone said.

Much of the research remains in the development stage, officials said. Some of the information is still "quite technical," Langone said, and researchers are working to break it down to understandable data for the non-experts. The study will eventually be made available on a web site, although that's still not ready for public review.

**Clearing the Record**

Because of incorrect information from the Travel, Tourism and Recreation Resource Center at Michigan State University, U.S. 27 north of Clare was misidentified as U.S. 127 in this story.