

Over 300,000 affected by boil-water advisory in New Orleans

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The first boil-water advisory in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina was put into effect late last Friday night, lasting most of the weekend for a total of 41 hours. The advisory, prompted by a failure at the city's water purification plant, affected the entire east bank of the Greater New Orleans Area—including the city's French Quarter.

Residents were strongly advised to only use water that had been heated at a rolling boil for at least one minute. From Friday until Sunday, New Orleanians drank and bathed with water that was treated in this way.

The malfunction in the century-old water purification plant was caused by a 10-minute outage to its power supply, resulting in a chain reaction in which water pressure throughout the city plummeted from 65 pounds per square inch (psi) to a dangerously low 10 psi. The plant's electricity is generated by six large boilers that are heated to run a system of turbines. These turbines provide power to pumps, which then suck in water from the Mississippi River to be purified and distributed throughout the city.

On Friday night at 10:28 p.m., at least one tube inside one of the boilers ruptured, apparently located directly over a flame that is crucial to heating. This sudden burst blew out the flame, causing the entire boiler to break down. The inability to compensate for the increased workload caused a second and third boiler to fail as well. Three pumps ceased operation due to the lack of electricity, causing a massive drop in water pressure.

The plant has the capability to fuel the pumps using natural gas, but the compressor essential to increasing the pressure of the gas to a useful level had broken. The failure of this very same compressor produced a 25-minute power outage during a rainstorm in 2007,

resulting in heavy street flooding in half of the city.

Power was restored 10 minutes after the outage by secondary generators and backup turbines running on diesel. One of the main pumps suffered severe mechanical damage during the power failure, however, and the plant's full capacity was not actually restored until Saturday night.

The drop in water pressure put the entire water supply at risk of contamination, although a series of tests throughout the weekend found no harmful bacteria or other pathogens.

A series of public statements by city officials demonstrated the severe lack of funding, the inability and unwillingness of state and federal governments to act, and the daunting task of rebuilding in the post-Katrina city. Mayor Mitch Landrieu said that residents should not be surprised by the water plant's failure, observing, "New Orleans is the canary in the coal mine for the nation's infrastructure."

The city has appealed to Congress for \$1.8 million dollars to rebuild the power plant. A payment of \$3 million from FEMA is pending. However, these meager sums do not even begin to satisfy the estimated total of \$1 billion in costs of fully rebuilding and bolstering the entire operations of the Sewerage and Water Board (including the city's drainage system).

This sobering occurrence makes it clear that this may not be the last boil-water advisory. Indeed, there is quite a substantial possibility that there could be an even larger failure at the aging water purification plant—and next time, residents may not be so lucky.

In light of the massive cholera outbreak in Haiti, which has already claimed more than 1,000 lives, it should be considered that a disaster of this magnitude

could potentially occur in New Orleans unless the city's water system is repaired.



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