

Water supply to DC suburb restricted in midst of heat wave

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Residents of Maryland's Prince George's County, a suburb of Washington, D.C., have been ordered to restrict their water usage while a failing 54-inch water main is replaced. The nearly 200,000 residents were facing a total water shortage, but officials from the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC) found a way to divert water around the repairs and into the city.

The fix, which averted the potential for the county to go without water for up to five days, was made Tuesday night when a key valve near the failing pipeline was shut off. The valve had reportedly been stuck. This meant both that water could be diverted to supply the area with limited water, and that the time needed to repair the pipeline was reduced up to five days to at most three, as long as there are no further delays.

Prince George's County's water shortage comes amidst the hottest week so far this year. Across the East Coast, a heat wave has caused near triple-digit temperatures for the past three days and is expected to continue to at least Saturday. In the Washington, D.C., area, the high temperatures are 98 degrees Fahrenheit for most of the week with the humidity pushing projections for the heat index (what the temperature feels like with humidity) up to 110 degrees F. Nighttime temperatures are in the 70s with the heat index expected to rise to the 80s.

Such temperatures can easily cause hyperthermia or heat stroke, conditions exacerbated when water is not freely available.

Although the county has opened three water distribution locations to provide residents with water if needed, they also told residents to buy water if needed. While it looked like there would be a lack of water for nearly a week, officials informed residents to stockpile

two gallons of water per person per day for drinking—400,000 gallons a day for the affected population—and to fill up bathtubs or other large containers for toilet water and other miscellaneous uses, including providing water for pets. Residents filled up inflatable pools, buckets, and trashcans in an effort to store water.

In the scramble to secure drinking water, many residents were unable to acquire the recommended supplies. Reports from across the region indicate that gallon jugs of water and the pricier alternatives of name-brand water bottles sold out quickly.

Firefighters, hospitals and other essential services have enacted contingency plans. The fire department deployed eight vehicles holding 3,000 gallons of water throughout the county in case of a fire. County emergency services did have plans to ensure hospitals and nursing homes had water before the limited water flow was restored.

Despite the fact that a limited water flow exists for Prince George's county, a great deal of economic damage has already been done. Poverty has been rising in the area since 2009 (and now stands at 8.2%), and many families were burdened by the expense of preparing for the anticipated shortage. Many were also compelled to take time off work to stockpile resources and check on elderly family members. In addition, large numbers of businesses were forced to shut down for a lack of water, especially places like laundromats and restaurants where water is essential. Other events, such as the 51st Delta Sigma Theta sorority convention, with a guest list of 8,000 people, will potentially be canceled because of the reduced water supply. The total economic damage has yet to be calculated.

The restrictions of the WSSC include stopping all outdoor water use (watering lawns, washing cars,

filling swimming pools). The WSSC has also requested that residents take shorter showers, limit flushing toilets and postpone using washing machines and dishwashers.

The water commission has also called a halt to the use of large-scale air conditioners, such as those for apartment buildings, which use cold water to cool air rather than the coolant used in smaller units. At the Temple Hills assisted-living facility, management sent out a letter telling residents that because of the water main repair and the restrictions in place, the building-wide air conditioning was turned off. Some of the tenants are more than 100 years old. To keep cool, residents have been shutting blinds and turning fans on, although such measures are reportedly doing little to keep temperatures from rising.

Museums, schools and libraries are also closed because of the water restrictions, including the National Children's Museum at National Harbor. The Prince George's County Memorial Library System has closed the Hillcrest Heights Branch and Oxon Hill Branch through Friday. Certain public schools' summer programs will be closed through Thursday.

Joint Base Andrews, a Navy and Air Force base that houses the aircraft commonly known as Air Force One, was also affected. Mission-essential-only operations began 9 p.m. Tuesday, and many facilities were shut down. Airmen brought in portable water tanks and toilet facilities for use throughout the base.



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