

Los Angeles water main break points to failing national infrastructure

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On Tuesday, a water main broke at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), flooding the school and nearby area with over 20 million gallons of water before being shut off. The rupture of the nearly 100-year-old pipe is a portent, pointing to the larger crisis of the nation's failing, outdated water pipe system.

At its height, the breach set loose 35,000 gallons of water every minute. Water was gushing as high as 30 feet in the air, blowing a 15-foot hole underneath Sunset Blvd., a major street adjacent to UCLA. On Wednesday, the system was still leaking 1,000 gallons a minute before being fully shut down that day.

The campus was flooded with water, ruining the floor of a gymnasium that was just renovated for \$132 million. An underground parking structure near Sunset Blvd. was inundated, with several levels completely submerged in water. At the time of writing UCLA officials say there are still 739 cars and trucks stuck in school parking lots, submerged in water. The campus is amidst a massive cleanup effort to deal with the flood.

The irony of the situation was not lost on anyone. California is in the midst of its worst drought in a century. Some Californian local governments are fining people for watering their lawns for \$500 dollars apiece. The drought will cause billions of dollars of damage this year, throw tens of thousands of farm workers into unemployment, and, worst of all, the drought is expected to continue, becoming increasingly severe, in the coming years.

Far from being a fluke though, the bursting of the water main is indicative of the old, deteriorating, water system that feeds Los Angeles. It calls attention to a nation-wide issue of the failure of century-old infrastructure, and the lack of any rational plan to deal with it.

In 2009, a local news station KTLA did a special on LA's pipe system, after several significant water pipe bursts. In the year of the report, LA faced more destructive water pipe blow outs than in over 70 years, KTLA says that this, though, "is only the beginning." According to the news report, the DWP says there are at least 100 water mains all over the city that are, immediately, in "serious danger of failing." Under Downtown Los Angeles "many water mains are over a hundred years old." Some that are still in use today were built as far back as 1887.

In the report, a city official cites DWP statistics that it has taken 5 years for them to replace 9 miles of pipes. The official doubts the feasibility of replacing water pipes at that rate, "I don't think any of us will be around," he commented. As the head of the DWP states, there are thousands of miles of water pipe underneath Los Angeles, enough "to get to New York and back."

Last year, the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) published a report card of the nation's drinking water infrastructure, giving it a "D+." The report states that in the United States "much of the drinking water infrastructure is old and in need of replacement." It continues, "Failures in drinking water infrastructure can result in water disruptions, impediments to emergency response, and damage to other types of infrastructure. Broken water mains damage roadways and structures and hinder fire control efforts. Unscheduled repair work to address emergency pipe failures may cause additional disruptions to transportation and commerce."

According to the American Water Works Association's (AWWA) 2012 estimate, it will cost \$950 billion dollars to replace outdated water mains in the United States, an effort they propose should be

spread across the next few decades. In addition, \$801 billion is needed to provide for water pipe growth in the next 25 years. The ASCE report states that water main breaks are becoming more common and warns that the current practice of mainly replacing pipes after they have broken is a disaster.

The ASCE estimates that overall the infrastructure in the United States needs \$3.6 trillion of investments over the next 20 years to bring infrastructure into a state of good repair. This comes out to a yearly investment of \$454 billion, while the government spent only \$253 billion last year.



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