

100,000 Bay County, Michigan residents threatened with water crisis

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Some 100,000 residents of Bay County, Michigan appear to have narrowly avoided a water crisis. On Monday afternoon, after two days of searching, workers may have finally located the source of a massive water-main leak that began Saturday morning. On Sunday, Bay City Public Works Director Dave Harran had said that if the leak wasn't stopped by Monday, the system could run entirely out of water. As of this writing, Harran has stated that he is "fairly confident" the source of the leak had been located.

The City of Bay City issued a "Non-Essential Drinking Water Use Restriction" prohibiting residents from using water for "purposes other than the maintenance of public health and safety." Residents were asked to stop doing laundry and watering their lawns, and to limit the amount of water they use for drinking and personal hygiene, but "we obviously can't go around enforcing it," Harran told the Bay City Times.

At a press conference Sunday, Bay City Manager Richard Finn said that the water system had been losing five million gallons every twelve hours since Saturday afternoon, and "if businesses begin to operate Monday morning, there will not be enough water [...] to continue to provide for the basic human needs for the residential population." He continued, "We also know for sure that if we don't do something to restrict the use of water that we will not have enough water and we will go below the state requirements and that will require boiling of water."

Bay County borders Michigan's Saginaw Bay, and the county seat, Bay City, straddles the Saginaw River, an international shipping channel. Crews worked overnight Sunday checking the five mains that run under the river between the two halves of town, a process that took two hours per main. State Police used

a helicopter to search for signs of pooling water in the county's expansive cornfields.

The emergency in Bay County is only the latest in a string of water crises in the region and nationwide. Earlier this month, a huge poisonous algae bloom visible from space—which turned tap water toxic to the touch and threatened nerve damage if drunk—saw 400,000 Toledo, Ohio area residents forced to use bottled water.

In January of this year, a toxic chemical spill contaminated the drinking water of 300,000 Charleston, West Virginia residents, with some affected for as many as ten days. In July, the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) campus was flooded by 8 to 10 million gallons when a 90-year-old water main burst.

And two hours' drive south from Bay City is Detroit, which suffers from a severely decaying infrastructure (500 of the city's water mains broke in the month of January 2014 alone, according to a *New York Times* article). In addition, hundreds of thousands of its poorest residents—including children, the elderly and the very ill—are being shut off from water service as part of a comprehensive plan by the unelected emergency manager in an effort to "restructure" the city through bankruptcy in the interest of banks and wealthy speculators.

Water main breaks nationwide are increasing in frequency, with an estimated 240,000 breaks per year. The condition of the estimated 1 million miles of water mains in the US is largely unknown. In 2013, the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) gave America's water infrastructure a grade of D, due to its increasing age. Some of these pipes date back to before the Civil War, with wooden pipes still in use in places. In many cities, average pipe ages are between 70 and 90 years old.

According to conservative estimates from the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 2007, the nation's water system needs \$334.8 billion invested over the next 20 years. Not meeting these investment needs, warns the ASCE, "risks reversing the environmental, public health, and economic gains of the last three decades." However, according to the ASCE, Congressional appropriations have declined under the Obama administration to an average of \$1.38 billion annually, or about 8 percent of the need identified by the EPA.



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