

“Extreme emergency” declared for New Orleans’ drainage system

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The New Orleans Sewerage and Water Board (S&WB) declared an “extreme emergency” for the city’s antiquated drainage system.

Announced in a letter posted on October 8 by then Deputy Superintendent Bruce Adams, the declaration approves emergency spending on a turbine needed to facilitate power generation for the city’s aging drainage system. Without the turbine, the agency declared, the city would not be able to produce enough power to counter inevitable flooding during heavy rainstorms.

Following the declaration, Adams was appointed as interim general superintendent, the second highest position in the agency below the executive director, on Friday, the same day that the emergency declaration was approved.

New Orleans’ drainage system has been under a declared state of emergency since August 10, following the immense flooding produced by heavy rainstorms on August 5 which locals described as a “mini-Katrina”.

As of October 12, 110 of the city’s 120 drainage and constant duty pumps are functioning, with 10 out of service, placing the total operational capacity of the city’s drainage operations, dispersed across 24 pumping stations (excluding 12 underpass stations), at 94 percent.

The S&WB’s website defines the city’s 100 drainage pumps as being primarily used during rain events, whereas the 20 constant duty pumps run constantly and are primarily used to pump ground water.

Those pumps which are out of order range in their pumping capacity from eight to 1,100 cubic feet per second. Two of the eight at the station in the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood are out of service, while three of the 12 are out at the station in the Lakeview neighborhood, both neighborhoods having borne the brunt of the levee breaches following hurricane Katrina’s impact.

A total of five turbines comprise the city’s entire 100-plus-year-old drainage system’s power supply, with a

sixth turbine having been decommissioned decades ago. Four of the five rely on an obsolete 25 Hz steam-power system.

The most powerful of the four 25 Hz turbines, Turbine 4, which is a 1920s-era piece of equipment that was purchased used more than 50 years ago, has been offline since 2012.

Badly damaged from the flooding caused by Katrina, costs for repairing it have skyrocketed to \$24 million from \$12.5 million over a five-year period. Originally scheduled to return to service on September 5, that date has been pushed back to the end of this year after the turbine suffered minor damages from an electrical fire on September 6.

Instead of purchasing a new 60 Hz gas-fire combustion turbine at \$16.3 million, the city has dragged on repairs for the outmoded Turbine 4 with the argument that a large percentage of the drainage pumps require the 25 Hz that the city is able to generate. The S&WB has rubber-stamped every additional bill, piling up the total costs for repairs.

Bill Chrisman, the city’s former capital projects director and a former pump station construction manager, said that completion of the repair project was “critical, absolutely critical.” He countered the S&WB’s argument for prolonging the repairs, saying, “The fact is, they could have replaced that turbine much cheaper and much quicker had they made that decision years ago.”

The criminally negligent approach of the S&WB was summed up by former board member Stacey Head, who, in response to contractors reporting how damaged the turbine was after opening it, quipped, “Never open anything up!”

Another of the innumerable indications of the decayed state of New Orleans infrastructure was revealed on the morning of September 20 when Turbine 6 temporarily malfunctioned, causing a decrease in water pressure

throughout the city below the state threshold which “triggered a precautionary boil water advisory,” the 12th issued since 2010.

The *Times Picayune* explained, “Low water pressure can allow harmful coliform bacteria in groundwater to seep into drinking water pipes through cracks.” The boil water advisory, however, was lifted the following day.

Though officials have claimed that no detection of groundwater contamination has resulted from the advisories over this time period, these instances continue to reveal the extremely fragile state of the city's water, sanitation, and drainage system, which is vulnerable to incapacitation due to the slightest incident.

The repeated exposure of the city's thoroughly inadequate and neglected infrastructure has caused residents' confidence in the S&WB to plummet in the recent months.

According to a recent poll conducted for the *New Orleans Advocate* and local news station WWL-TV, 82 percent of respondents disapprove of the performance of the agency, whose president since 2010 has been the city's outgoing Democratic mayor, Mitch Landrieu.

The poll found that 64 percent of the residents rated drainage and flood control as being the second most important priority for the city, close behind the 72 percent that rated crime and public safety as the highest priority.

In briefing the city at a press conference prior to Hurricane Nate's landfall less than two weeks ago, Landrieu expressed the indifference of the ruling elite towards the difficulties the working class will bear due to the crumbling of crucial flood control infrastructure.

Discussing potential aid for those affected by flooding he stated that a pittance of local government assistance would have to be offset by “the cooperation of the residents. It all depends on people leaning forward, helping themselves, and helping each other out.”



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