

Kentucky residents face water shutoffs as UK study exposes health dangers from leaking pipes

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Residents of Martin County, Kentucky have received notices warning them that water service will be turned off if payments are not received by February 20. At the same time, county water district officials are seeking state approval to raise rates 49.6 percent.

This is the latest affront to citizens in the former coal mining county, where water service was repeatedly disrupted last month due to failing infrastructure, and residents have long complained of discolored, foul-tasting water, which causes skin rashes.

The threat of water shutoffs is being used to blackmail residents into paying for a financial crisis that they did not create. The district is \$816,000 in debt and is functioning on a cash-only basis with vendors that supply replacement parts, pipes, pumps and other badly needed equipment. It is estimated that \$13 million is needed for repairs.

In January, the Martin County Water District shut off service for several hours each day to the county's nearly 1,400 residents. The procedure went on for a number of days because an intake pump and service pipes froze during severely cold weather. Many residents did not have water at all or only intermittently for more than a week. Local schools were closed, and many were forced to rely on volunteers who donated and distributed bottles of water.

For years the water system, which has had no substantial investment in nearly fifty years, has been losing between 50-60 percent of its treated water due to aging, leaky pipes, which can also allow untreated groundwater—or worse—to seep in.

A significant scientific study conducted in Great Britain may shed light on the condition of the water in eastern Kentucky. In 2015, the University of Sheffield

engineers published the results of a study, entitled, “Leaky pipes can allow contaminants into our drinking water.”

The study is the first to prove conclusively that contaminants can enter pipes through leaks and be transported through the pipe network. The pressure in mains usually forces water out through leaks, preventing anything else from getting in. But when there is a significant pressure drop in a damaged section of pipe, water surrounding the pipe can be sucked in through the hole.

It had been assumed that only clean water from the leak would be sucked in, and that even if contaminants were sucked in these would simply be ejected once the pressure returned to normal. The new study has shown, however, that groundwater from around the pipe—which often contains harmful contaminants—can be sucked in, remain in the pipe and travel on through the network.

Researchers looked at tainted water and water loss. In England, it is estimated that 20-40 percent of the nation's water supply is lost through leaking pipes. That is still far less than the 60 percent seeping away in Martin County. Water loss in the United States is estimated on average to be 14-18 percent, resulting in the loss of 36 billion gallons or one-sixth of the public supplies passing through costly treatment systems. In areas such as Flint, Michigan the percentage of treated water lost through leaks is about 50 percent.

“Previous studies have shown that material around water pipes contains harmful contaminants, including viruses and bacteria from feces, so anything sucked into the network through a leak is going to include things we don't want to be drinking,” said lead Researcher

Professor Joby Boxall in the Sheffield report.

A “significant pressure drop” is exactly what occurred last month when the Martin County Water District turned the water off for 12 hours on at least two occasions in January. While the Kentucky Department of Environmental Protection website mentions problems with “backflow” and “backsiphonage,” it does not mention the danger from leaking waterlines in Martin County.

Many local residents attribute water pollution to the coal mining industry, which has pumped billions in profits from the working class and has largely abandoned the area, leaving behind an environmental and economic disaster.

Martin County was the scene of the October 11, 2000 disaster when the bottom of a coal slurry impoundment owned by Massey Energy broke, sending an estimated 306 million gallons of thick, black waste into two tributaries of the Tug Fork River. The spill, which contained arsenic and mercury, killed everything in the water and “was over five feet deep in places and covered nearby residents’ yards.”

County water bills come with warnings on the back, notifying residents that high levels of disinfectant byproducts could increase their risk of liver and kidney problems and cancer. The Environmental Protection Agency has turned a blind eye to Martin County Water District’s numerous violations of the EPA’s safe drinking water standards—which have occurred 36 times since 2012—most often for excessive levels of disinfection byproducts, such as trihalomethanes and haloacetic acids.

Martin County families have been protesting the lack of safe clean water for more than 18 years. The issue only gained national attention after an online video of a district public hearing went viral last month. Gary Michael Hunt, 39, a former coal miner, was choked and escorted out of an emergency public meeting by a state trooper last month because he voiced his opposition to the water shortages. More than half of a million people have now viewed the video.

Just like the working-class families poisoned by lead in Flint, Michigan, the residents of eastern Kentucky are now being forced to pay for water that is systematically undermining their health. The threat of rate hikes and water shutoffs has only deepened the anger of local residents.

Lynn Sites posted on Facebook, “During the mandatory cut-offs I went a week with no water, pregnant and alone. I got snowed in for 3 days with no water and had to pack in snow to melt and use.... But who am I to complain? Just someone who has had to be put on steroids while pregnant (for) a skin rash I developed while bathing in Martin County water.”

Scooter Lemaster, another Martin County resident, posted on Facebook, they “charge you to poison your own children with the contamination... they need to be in the penitentiary!”

Whether it is in Martin County, Flint, Puerto Rico or Cape Town, South Africa, the provision of the most essential necessity of life is subordinated to the drive for ever greater corporate profit. This will not be overcome by any section of the political establishment—Democrat or Republican—which all have a vested interest in defending the bondholders, banks, and profits of the financial oligarchy.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) are hosting a February 21 meeting at the University of Michigan, Flint to discuss a strategy to unify the working class nationally and internationally to fight for the social right to clean safe water. To get involved contact us at <https://www.facebook.com/SEPFlint/>.



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