

Jackson, Mississippi's public water system collapses after winter storm's deep freeze

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City officials in Jackson, Mississippi reported late last week that water service had been knocked out indefinitely for most of the city after a devastating winter storm shut down power and froze water lines, resulting in a drop in water pressure last week.

Icy weather conditions created power outages last week for much of the South, including many areas of Texas where freezing temperatures and lack of power have resulted in dozens of deaths. Of the many cities across the Southern US devastated by freezing temperatures last week, Jackson, Mississippi's capital and largest city with 160,000 residents, is among the worst hit.

Water main breaks constitute a major cause for concern, with Jackson experiencing 13 breaks in less than a week. Pressure drops and outages and boil water advisories were rampant across the state as the region's old and poorly maintained infrastructure struggled to function under adverse weather conditions. Many of the city's water mains and pipes have not been replaced in decades, with some piping being over 100 years old.

Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba told reporters on Thursday, "We do not have a definitive timeline as to when the water will be restored within the tanks.

"This becomes increasingly challenging due to the pandemic," Lumumba said. He attempted to blame the outage on COVID-19 restrictions and the closure of schools, claiming, "so many residents are at home instead of school, which means people are trying to use water at a higher rate than usual."

However, severe winter weather has caused a strain on Jackson's infrastructure in the recent past, and it is well known that a significant investment in the city's water system is overdue.

During a period of freezing cold temperatures in 2014-15, then Jackson Mayor Tony Yarber issued a

state of emergency in an attempt to secure federal funding to update city water mains and roads. Back in 2015 it was estimated by city officials that somewhere between \$750 million to \$1 billion would be needed to fully replace or repair the city's water mains and roads. Mayor Yarber filed a request for a paltry \$2.5 million in repairs as the city's water system crumbled.

"Our infrastructure is not prepared to handle this," Lumumba admitted on Thursday. Many people have been without water since Monday. Residents have resorted to gathering snow to melt to create enough water to flush their toilets.

The city set up stations at fire houses, some schools, a mall and other sporadic locations to hand out bottles and jugs of water to people able to go out in the cold and wait, a difficult task for the region's elderly and infirm residents.

Icy roads have prevented water treatment crews from receiving delivery of much needed chemicals to ensure the water being pumped into the city tanks is safe for use. As it stands, there remains a citywide boil water advisory, with residents who have water flowing from their taps instructed to boil their water before use to ensure potability.

As of Thursday, at least 221,000 homes across Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi were still without power. Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards stated on Thursday that there were at least one million residents under a boil water advisory, as well as another 245,000 facing water outages entirely.

Betsy Sawyer, a resident of Vidalia in the northeast of Louisiana, spoke to the Associated Press (AP) about having to deal with power and water outages in her area. "We knew that the water was going to be shut off so we filled the bathtub up with water," she explained. "Everybody's scrambling, just doing their best."

Sawyer said she had very low water pressure and was keeping warm using the burners on her stove.

Desperate residents in Louisiana and Mississippi waited for hours in order to claim water handouts at various city government sites. “A lot of people have been giving up—they’re tired of waiting,” Paul Lee Davis told the AP, as he waited in line at a distribution site in Jackson. “I’ve been here so long, I figure I might as well wait it out. We need water. The stores all are out. I don’t see what choice we have.”

Nicole Beard, a resident of Hackberry, Louisiana, told the AP how her hot water pipe burst and days later the water main burst, cutting off water to her area completely. Beard, who had to leave her home last year after it was destroyed by Hurricane Laura, explained that many in her community have still not fully recovered from that devastating storm six months ago. “People are still just struggling over here,” she said.



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