

Odessa, Texas water line break leaves tens of thousands without water

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Residents of Odessa, Texas had been without running water for at least 48 hours Wednesday following a main break on Monday that left the city without water amid a deadly summer heat wave.

City utility workers discovered a major, 24-inch water line break around 6 p.m. CDT on Monday. Due to a severe loss in water pressure and the break's proximity to the city's water plant, officials were forced to shut the plant down and issue a boil water notice for an estimated 165,000 people in the region—all of this during days when the temperature stayed above 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

Utility crews worked overnight to isolate the break to make repairs, but water continued to pour into the streets by Tuesday. Officials later reported the age of the infrastructure compounded the problem and repairs would take longer than anticipated.

Utilities Director Tom Kerr reported his crews spent the majority of Tuesday evacuating the water around the pipes so they could get to it and repair it.

Deputy City Manager Phillip Urrutia said the line that burst was a 60-70-year-old cast iron pipe. Cast iron pipes are prone to corrosion over time and typically have a lifespan of only between 40 and 50 years. In some cases, iron pipes begin developing problems at 25 years old.

"It's an aging infrastructure that we're seeing. It's a cast iron pipe, and so those are typically more susceptible to breaks than other new technologies like PVC pipe that's going in the ground," Urrutia told the Associated Press.

The water outage in Odessa is only the most recent consequence of the dilapidated character of US infrastructure. Industry experts warn America's aging infrastructure will continue to cause trouble in the near future.

New York Times reported, a the age of the 1.6 million miles of water and sewer pipes in the United States hit 45 years in 2020, with cast iron pipes in at least 600 towns and counties more than a century old. It is estimated that about 76 million homes in America have cast iron pipes that must be replaced.

Kerr said Odessa, an oil boom town first founded in 1881 in western Texas, still has large sections of cast iron pipes to replace. Portions of the line that broke Monday were on the city's "priority list" of lines in need of immediate repair.

"We do have it as a priority on our list, but it's not the only one. There are numerous areas where we have cast iron lines that are well over 60-70 years of age," Kerr said.

Utility workers were able to repair the line and get the city's water plant back online by Wednesday at 8 a.m. but officials said workers needed 12 to 14 hours for the "recharging" process, during which workers slowly add water back into the system to ensure there are no more leaks. After that, officials still have to wait 12 to 24 hours to conduct testing to ensure the water is free of pathogens and microbes before the boil water notice is lifted.

The loss of water disrupted much of normal life for the community as residents suddenly lost the ability to use their taps for basic household functions just over a year after severe freezing weather left tens of millions across Texas without water for days and weeks in some areas.

Numerous businesses and public offices were forced to shut their doors when they discovered they had no water or just a trickle early Tuesday morning. Residents said the University of Texas Permian Basin, city hall, county offices, Odessa College and countless restaurants and businesses put up signs declaring their

lack of water. Ector County Independent School District also canceled its summer school sessions.

Odessa's Medical Center Hospital was forced to cancel all surgeries and procedures planned for June 14 and June 15. On Tuesday, all dialysis procedures were limited to emergencies and the hospital also said its clinics would remain closed until further notice, but the Emergency Department, however, would remain open.

Odessa residents had braced themselves for several days of no water but received humanitarian aid from other West Texas cities such as Midland and Lubbock, who donated pallets of bottled water and water trucks placed strategically around the city in the event of a fire. Still, the donations only helped so much. City officials said they began distributing bottled water around 2 p.m. Tuesday but half of the available water was gone within 40 minutes. Local stores also reported severe shortages and are limiting the amount of water customers can buy.



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