

“Do not drink the water”: More than 180,000 without running water in Jackson, Mississippi

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In Jackson, Mississippi, the state’s capital city, a social crime is taking place. More than 180,000 residents lost access to clean drinking water this week due to the crumbling infrastructure of the city’s water treatment plant, lines, and drainage system which was overwhelmed by torrential rains brought on by climate change.

On Monday, the Pearl River in Northeast Jackson crested near 35.4 feet (10.78 meters). The river, however, is expected to fall below the “flood stage” late Thursday evening with a continual fall to an estimated 22.8 feet (6.94 meters) Saturday morning. The Pearl River Valley Water Supply District has decreased the discharge from the Ross Barnett Reservoir to 45,000 CFS (cubic feet per second) resulting in water intake to the reservoir to be decreased with additional reductions expected.

This has resulted in virtually little-to-no water pressure for Jackson residents, spawning myriad issues, such as the inability to utilize fire hydrants, flush toilets, and use tap water for general hygiene or even meeting medical needs. Raw water from the reservoir has made its way into the city’s drinking water system.

It is expected that water for many of those in the state’s most populous city will have to be provided “for an unknown period of time,” according to Republican Governor Tate Reeves, who declared a state of emergency Monday.

The city had been under a boil-water notice since the end of July due to poor water quality. Residents have become used to intermittent disruption to service over the years.

The case of Tamiko Smith sums up the measures poor and working class residents must take to secure their livelihoods. “Smith,” the *Mississippi Free Press* wrote, “gestures to a stack of boxes piled high in her

living room with sealed packages inside, like an I.V. supply for a giant. ‘My husband does dialysis four days a week. So that’s ...’ she pauses, counting the bags. ‘I have to have at least four boxes to be able to do that dialysis without using water. Normally we get two days’ supply, and now we’re stretched over to ...’ She waves off the thought and smiles beneath her mask. ‘I’ve lost count.’”

This weekend’s flooding has pushed the city’s decrepit water system into a state of complete collapse. “We’ve never had this before – not to this extreme,” Smith told the *Mississippi Free Press*.

Governor Reeves and other officials have shifted the blame from the paltry financing secured for repairs, replacement, and modernization of the water systems to the flooding of the Pearl River, without as much as a footnote on climate change.

The water crisis in Jackson, Mississippi is neither new nor isolated. Last year in February-March, after a historic winter storm brought on by climate change swept through the Southern US, 160,000 residents in Jackson and neighboring cities lost water service.

On Friday, Reeves mentioned he was informed prior to the flooding that it was a “near certainty that Jackson would fail to produce running water sometime in the next several weeks or months.” While cognizant of the longstanding issues, virtually nothing has been done to resolve the city’s water crisis. Rather, “band-aids” make do in the form of the distribution of bottled water and the activation of the National Guard.

On Monday evening, Reeves issued the typical perfunctory statements, saying, “All of this was with the prayer that we would have more time before their system ran to failure.” Reeves continued, “Unfortunately, that failure appears to have begun today.”

Reeves went onto say, “Please stay safe. Do not drink the water. In too many cases, it is raw water from the reservoir being pushed through the pipes. Be smart, protect yourself, protect your family.” Residents are being told to conserve any leftover water resources and to boil any water they use for three minutes.

Jackson’s Democratic mayor, Chokwe Antar Lumumba, like Reeves, explained that he had been expecting the city’s water system to collapse. “I have said on multiple occasions that it’s not a matter of ‘if’ our system would fail, but a matter of ‘when’ our system would fail.” Lumumba continued that the city has been “going at it alone for the better part of two years.”

The city has in fact been all but abandoned, not only at the Republican-controlled governor’s mansion and state legislature, but also at the national level by the Democratic Party which has controlled the House, Senate, and the White House. While the residents of Jackson have languished for years in desperate need of the overhaul of their water system, the United States has shelled out \$54 billion in just six months for the war in Ukraine. According to one estimate, it would cost only a fraction of that, \$1 billion, to fix the city’s water distribution system. Any aid which is provided now will be too little, too late to make impacted residents whole.

On Tuesday, according to White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre, President Joe Biden was been briefed on the water crisis in Jackson, further claiming the administration has been “in regular contact with state and local officials, including Mayor Lumumba, and made clear that the Federal Government stands ready to offer assistance.” She continued, “FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] is working closely with the state officials to identify needs, and the EPA is coordinating with industry partners to expedite delivery of critical treatment equipment for emergency repairs at the City of Jackson water treatment facilities.”

In a statement via email on Tuesday, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said “ensuring all people have access to healthy and safe water is a top priority.” The EPA statement continues, “We are in communication with officials in Mississippi and stand ready to provide support should the State request federal assistance. In the interim, we are

available to provide technical support and information to Mississippi officials as they navigate their plan to address the immediate concerns at the O.B. Curtis Water Plant.”

In 2021, Lumumba attempted to dismiss concerns over the decaying water and sewage system, saying, “There is a gap as large as the Grand Canyon in terms of people’s perception of the work being done, often depending upon the demographic makeup of those communities... The reality is the City of Jackson invests millions of dollars into our water infrastructure each and every year.”

Since 1997, the city of Jackson has spent only \$200 million in water improvements, including the construction of additional storage tanks, general water-treatment plant improvements, and transmission line repair and replacement.

The city of Jackson filed a lawsuit in 2019 against the international tech conglomerate Siemens for more than \$450 million in damages stemming from botched work on Jackson’s water-sewer infrastructure and billing system, affecting hundreds of thousands of people. In early 2020, the city reached a \$89.9 million settlement with the company, about a third of which went to attorney’s fees, leaving the city essentially worse off than before.



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