

Millions placed under two-day boil water advisory in Houston, Texas

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Millions of residents across the Houston, Texas, metropolitan area were placed under a boil water notice from Sunday to Tuesday after two transformers went offline at the city's East Water Purification Plant, according to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

During that time, approximately 2.2 million water customers were told to boil water for at least two minutes before preparing food, drinking, bathing or brushing their teeth. Residents of the fourth most populous city in the US were also told to avoid using water from refrigerators or ice makers, with those unable to boil water being advised to use bottled water.

The Houston Independent School District (HISD) closed all campuses, offices and facilities through Wednesday, citing concerns of being able to provide safe meals and water for students and staff. However, HISD employees were still required to work remotely if possible. The *Houston Chronicle* also reported Aldine, Pasadena and Spring Branch school districts canceled Monday classes.

Governor Greg Abbott said Sunday in a statement that he directed the Texas Division of Emergency Management (TDEM) and the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) to support the city as it works to address the issue with its water system.

"The State of Texas is immediately responding and deploying support to Houston as they work to get a safe supply of water back online," he said. "We have been in contact with Mayor [Sylvester] Turner to offer the full support of the state, and we're currently working to fulfill the city's request for help with rapid turnaround of water sample results."

Although Abbott offered support from the state's emergency management services, it is unclear as of this writing what assistance was provided.

The situation developed early Sunday morning when water pressure dipped below the state safety requirement of 20 PSI following an outage at Houston's East Water Purification Plant, the city's Department of Public Works said in a statement.

A reduction or loss of pressure in a water distribution system can result in backflow, when water flows in the wrong direction, allowing contaminants to enter drinking water, constituting a serious threat to public health.

At a Monday morning press conference, Mayor Turner informed residents the notice would stay in place until at least Tuesday morning.

According to Turner, the following is a timeline of the events following the power outage:

- 10:30 a.m. Sunday: East water purification plants one, two and three lose power due to ground failures, causing 14 sensors to register below 20 PSI for less than two minutes, two sensors below 20 PSI for 30 minutes, with five sensors never falling below the state threshold.

- 12:15 p.m.: Power restored to plants one and two.

- 12:30 p.m.: Power restored to plant three.

- 2:43 p.m.: Conversations begin with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ).

Full water pressure was restored at all locations. City workers discover a "bad cell" in a Plant one transformer.

- 6:40 p.m.: After conversations with the TCEQ conclude, Houston issues a boil water notice via email and text.

Many Houston residents expressed concern over the city waiting until hours after the incident to issue warnings. During that time, the city was investigating what had happened and was working with state regulators to determine what its legal obligations were,

according to Erin Jones, a spokeswoman for Houston Public Works.

According to Houston Public Works Director Carol Haddock, the city needed approval from the state's environmental agency before the public could be notified. Still, many residents reported not receiving a notification from the city until late in the night. The last-minute character of the warning prompted late-night trips by residents to stores to buy bottled water late Sunday as news of the problem spread.

Haddock told the *Texas Tribune* there was no evidence the city's water was contaminated, adding that the boil water notice was issued out of an abundance of caution and to comply with regulatory standards.

"We still have no indication that the system was compromised at any point and that it had any of the type of catastrophic potential that larger events might have had and caused an immediate notice," Haddock said.

At Monday's press conference, Mayor Turner said drops in water pressure do not automatically trigger a boil water notice, and the city has 24 hours to issue a boil water notice from the time of the incident. Additionally, Turner said that backup generators were not turned on amid the notice because officials first believed a break in the main water line was the source of the problem.

Houston water director Yvonne Williams Forrest said the delay was because the city's pressure system was never at zero, just below the regulatory limit required to keep contaminants from infiltrating the water system.

Although the boil water notice was lifted, some residents have reported reduced water pressure at their homes because of the outage. City officials have insisted the water system should have rebounded to at least regulatory standards.

Houston residents have been under a boil- water notice twice before in the last two years. The city issued a boil water notice during the 2021 winter freeze, which devastated Texas' out-of-date power grid and millions were without access to electricity or water for days. And in February 2020, Houston issued a boil water notice after a 96-inch water main break spewed water for several hours and caused pressure levels to drop below state regulatory levels for an extended period of time.

According to Center Point Energy, which provides much of the city with electricity, the power outage at the water plant was caused by a fault in the city's equipment—a further demonstration of the neglect towards the country's critical infrastructure under capitalism.



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