

Jackson, Mississippi water crisis continues with thousands of residents left without water after winter freeze

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The city of Jackson, Mississippi, remains under a boil water advisory as crews struggled to restore water pressure to thousands of residents in the wake of a deep freeze over the holiday weekend that caused pipes to break and leak.

On Wednesday, Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba said, “As of this morning, the system has begun to begin to recover. Pressure at the [O.B. Curtis Water Treatment] plant is close to 75 psi—90 psi is full capacity—that’s pounds per square inch, and around 55 million gallons per day. But the far reaches of the system are still not seeing full pressure recovery.”

Last week, as frigid temperatures gripped large swathes of North America, temperatures in Jackson plummeted as low as 1 degree Fahrenheit (?17 degrees Celsius) on December 24, colder even than the low of 12 degrees Fahrenheit (?11 degrees Celsius) recorded the day before. The temperature surfaced above freezing briefly on Christmas Day, but days of sub-freezing temperatures put immense stress on the fragile water distribution system, creating leaks that dropped the system’s water pressure and left households without running taps.

On Tuesday, Lumumba declared a state of emergency in the city, two days after the city issued the boil water advisory. By Wednesday, after days of searching to identify dozens of leaks around the city, Lumumba said residents may have running water again “by Saturday,” although he admitted “that is a bit of an ambitious goal.”

Jackson is the capital and largest city in Mississippi, with about 153,000 residents. Its water system has collapsed multiple times in the last two years. In February 2021, similarly extreme winter temperatures

froze pipes and resulted in no running water for weeks.

In November, months after late summer flooding on the Pearl River inundated the O.B. Curtis Water Treatment Plant and caused the city to lose water, the Department of Justice reached a settlement with the city over alleged mismanagement of the system. The settlement called for the appointment of a third-party manager of the water system, whose priorities were supposed to include winterizing the system and monitoring its stability.

In an interview this week with the *Mississippi Free Press*, that third-party monitor, Ted Henifin, presented a summary of what happened. Henifin said, “Starting Friday evening [December 23], we had some small process challenges at the plant, but we recovered from that well. By midday Saturday, we were producing lots of water; we’d caught back up to where we needed to be. We felt good about where we were pressure-wise. And then the pressure just dropped out of the system around afternoon on Christmas Eve and kept falling.”

Henifin said that when the city “pushed more and more water into the system,” it “didn’t see any response,” comparing the process to “putting air in a tire with a hole in it. You’re losing pressure as fast as you’re putting it in.”

The timing of the latest loss of running water, combined with the boil water advisory for those who have water but at low pressure, caught thousands of Jackson residents by surprise, coming as it did right at the start of the Christmas holiday weekend, when many people planned to cook at home with family.

Emon Thompson, a 54-year-old resident, told NBC News, “If you let it, it becomes depressing, especially during the holiday season. I’m trying to keep my head

up and just doing a lot of cleaning and other things.”

On social media, people expressed exasperation with the latest water crisis to hit the city, criticizing repeated empty promises from government officials to resolve the crisis and wondering why there was not more support for people struggling without water. Photographer Justin Hardiman shared video of a line of cars wrapped around a local mall, saying, “People are still coming. People have been waiting in line for about 3 hours for water.”

In one of his press conferences this week, Lumumba said he had “spoken to residents who are tired of apologies,” but the mayor blamed the latest crisis on a “worst case scenario” with the weather. “There is no way to prevent what is happening to our water treatment facilities,” he declared, quipping, “We do not control Mother Nature.”

It was not weather that broke Jackson’s water system, but chronic underinvestment. The mayor’s statement blaming “Mother Nature” is contradicted by remarks by Henifin to the *Free Press*, who explained that “proper engineering can install pipes in this material”—the yazoo clay comprising Jackson’s soil—“understand how it’s going to move in different weather conditions and protect it. ... We probably have some pipe that was put in during certain timeframes that’s in really good shape, because whoever was doing it took the time to really figure out how to do it right.”

Besides coming during the holidays, the timing of the latest water outage is also noteworthy for the fact that it coincided with the signing of a \$1.7 trillion spending package by President Joe Biden that includes federal funding for the city’s water system.

The \$600 million set aside for Jackson’s water system, of which about \$450 million will go toward capital improvements—actual additions or changes to the system—is but a drop in the bucket for a system whose repair estimates range in the billions of dollars. Meanwhile, the same budget provides \$45 billion in aid to Ukraine to fuel the US-NATO proxy war against Russia as part of more than \$900 billion in military spending.



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