

Washington D.C. declares public emergency after Potomac sewer collapse

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Washington, D.C. Democratic Mayor Muriel Bowser declared a public emergency Tuesday in response to the massive sewage spill on the Potomac River. Her declaration followed the collapse of a key sewer line in mid-January, which is expected to take months to repair.

The emergency order authorizes the District government to waive certain procurement rules, reassign staff and seek federal reimbursement for costs tied to the spill and related repair work. It will remain in effect for 15 days unless extended by the D.C. Council. During this period, District agencies will work with federal partners including the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers while monitoring the environment.

The incident traces back to January 19, when a section of the Potomac Interceptor—a roughly 60-year-old, 54-mile sewer line—failed in Montgomery County, Maryland, near the District line. The interceptor carries wastewater from parts of Maryland and Virginia to D.C.'s Blue Plains Advanced Wastewater Treatment Plant, handling an average of about 60 million gallons a day. After the collapse, an estimated 240-243 million gallons of raw sewage directly flowed into the Potomac River before DC Water completed a temporary bypass on January 24.

Water-quality monitoring has recorded sharply elevated E. coli levels in the river near and downstream from the release, with readings fluctuating in response to temperature and river flow. Officials in D.C., Maryland and Virginia have emphasized that even when E. coli returns to within federal recreational standards, other pathogens and pollutants associated with untreated sewage, such as viruses, parasites and chemical contaminants, remain a concern.

Public health agencies have issued layered advisories and closures. In the District, residents are advised to avoid contact recreation in the Potomac near Georgetown and

the Key Bridge boathouse area. Maryland has closed shellfish harvesting in wide stretches of the lower Potomac and cautioned against water contact in affected areas. The Virginia Department of Health similarly urged residents to avoid swimming, boating, fishing and other water-contact activities in contaminated segments of the river. Virginia officials noted that the contamination has moved more than 30 miles downstream and continues to travel with river conditions.

While much of the early media coverage has centered on Georgetown's waterfront, restrictions extend to smaller, less affluent river communities and fishing areas in southern Maryland and Northern Virginia. The closure impacts small marinas, boat-rental outfits, fishing guide services and bait-and-tackle shops that depend heavily on spring traffic on both the Maryland and Virginia sides of the river. One employee of District Angling told *Axios* the economic outlook for the region was "the worst I've seen in 20 years."

Responsibility for the interceptor and its maintenance lies with DC Water, the District of Columbia Water and Sewer Authority. The Potomac Interceptor is owned, operated and maintained by DC Water, even where it runs on federal land and is regulated primarily by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

DC Water, which is an independent authority funded primarily through water and sewage bills, bonds and other non-tax means, has indicated that emergency stabilization of the damaged interceptor will take up to 9-10 months. Full long-term repairs will require several years and are expected to cost roughly \$600 million to \$625 million.

The authority acknowledged in an open letter that the Potomac Interceptor was a known vulnerability in an aging system and that long-term capital planning had identified the need for upgrades as regional population and wastewater flows increased. Environmental organizations, including Potomac Conservancy and the

Potomac Riverkeeper Network, say they had previously raised concerns over deferred maintenance and called for more aggressive investment in core sewer infrastructure.

To finance DC Water's FY 2027 budget, the authority plans to rely heavily on borrowing and rate increases. In the wake of the Potomac spill, DC Water officials have signaled that additional rate increases are likely.

For customers, this means the cost of maintaining and rebuilding the interceptor will primarily be borne through higher water and sewer bills rather than through direct District appropriations. The city's projected FY 2027 budget shortfall, currently estimated at around \$1.1 billion when expiring one-time funds and inflation are included, does not directly impact DC Water's capital program.

The spill has become a political flashpoint beyond financing issues. President Donald Trump has repeatedly commented on the incident, urging Bowser and the governors of Maryland and Virginia to "act immediately," while using social media posts and interviews to blame local leaders for the failure.

He has singled out Maryland Governor Wes Moore and Virginia Governor Abigail Spanberger, both Democrats, accusing them of mismanagement and "environmental incompetence," even as federal agencies continue to oversee aspects of the interceptor's operation and the broader regional sewer system.

"Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, D.C., who are responsible for the massive sewage spill in the Potomac River, must get to work, IMMEDIATELY," Trump bellowed on Truth Social. Summoning his best mafioso impression, the president added, "If they can't do the job, they have to call me and ask, politely, to get it fixed."

While the various state and city governments are hardly innocent, the Trump administration's efforts to place sole blame on them are laughable. Beginning with the COVID-19 pandemic, Trump has systematically sought to hinder public health efforts, subordinating human life to the profit system. In his second administration, Trump has presided over a measles outbreak as numerous pockets of the country, mainly in heavily Republican areas with large numbers of Christian fundamentalists, have recorded steadily declining vaccination rates.

In the case of FEMA, Trump has moved to cut both staffing and parts of its funding since returning to office. The administration has reduced the agency's workforce from about 23,903 employees at the start of 2025 to 22,368 by year's end, a roughly 6.5 percent drop. Internal plans under a FEMA Review Council draft would cut the agency's staff roughly in half, eliminating more than

12,000 positions, mainly in its disaster workforce.

The EPA has also been hamstrung, with the administration targeting career officials opposing the dismantling of all regulation of corporate polluters. Last month, the EPA moved to exclude the health impact of fine particulate matter, ozone and other harmful substances when considering cost-benefit scenarios. Last week, the agency rescinded its Endangerment Finding regarding greenhouse gases, a foundational part of environmental regulation over the past two decades.

The emergency declaration intersects with an already deep budget crisis in the District of Columbia. Financial officials have warned of a sizable structural gap in the coming years, prompting discussions of spending cuts and drastic revenue changes.

Ward 4 Councilmember Janeese Lewis George, the frontrunner in the city's upcoming mayoral primaries and a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, has pointed to closing unspecified "tax loopholes" and "taxing the rich" as approaches to addressing the shortfall while making the city more affordable. But she has not yet put forward any detailed plans to solve the budget crisis and any increased taxation on the wealthy is sure to be blocked either by the City Council or the Trump administration.



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