

# Massive flooding in New Orleans as five pumps go offline

By Aaron Murch  
18 May 2019

The New Orleans Sewage and Water Board (SWB) announced this week that following several hours of heavy rain on May 12 five major city water pumps went offline. During the ensuing flash flooding the pumps, located in the City Park and Gentilly areas, shut down, resulting in massive street flooding in several neighborhoods in the Mid City and French Quarter areas.

According to a tweet sent out by the SWB, 115 out of the 120 drainage pumps were operational during the rains. Some three to five inches of rain fell between 11 p.m. Saturday and 6 a.m. Sunday, overwhelming the pumps' drainage capacity. Images of flooded neighborhoods and streets appeared all over social media as residents complained of flooded sidewalks.

The breakdown of the pumping system, almost 14 years after the failure of levees during Hurricane Katrina resulted in the devastation of wide areas of the city, is a further demonstration of the criminal neglect of infrastructure by city, state and federal officials in a city particularly vulnerable to flooding.

According to the initial report, only one pump lost power during the rains, but another report released on Tuesday stated that four more pumps were also offline due to a tripped power breaker.

This comes less than two weeks after a 114-year-old water pipe burst, flooding the Freret neighborhood on May 2. The burst pipe, which was installed in 1905, created dangerous water shortages to nearby hospitals, placing wide swaths of the Uptown New Orleans neighborhood under a "boil water advisory," a public health crisis wherein residents are urged to boil potentially contaminated water.

Over the last six years New Orleans has seen 17 such advisories, usually the result of a loss in water pressure caused by either broken pipes or power failures. City

Councilman Joseph Giarusso told residents, "You've also got to remember some of the infrastructure at the water plant dates back to World War I, too. It's the pipes, the pumps that are nearly that old in many of the cases. We're just working with an infrastructure that's going to be obsolete in fairly short order."

On Tuesday the SWB released an interactive map indicating that as many as half of the city's 1,500 miles of drainage pipes are at least 80 years old and 34 percent are 100 years old or older.

Only 21 pipes have been replaced since 2000. In a press conference a year ago, after another afternoon of heavy rains in May 2018 caused massive flooding, newly inaugurated Democratic Mayor LaToya Cantrell made the comment, "We are a city that floods." She added, "When we take on too much water at any given time, we will have street flooding."

The SWB, despite millions in funding from FEMA, the Army Corps of Engineers, and various loans and bonds, is frequently strapped for the cash needed for crucial upgrades. Late last year the board was able to find nearly \$50 million in unused FEMA grants and newly freed up "restricted accounts." Despite this, rate hikes and water shutoffs have plagued local residents for the last few years as board directors frequently claim there is not enough money for the necessary repairs and upgrades. In a recent corruption scandal it was found that the SWB had several "unauthorized positions," i.e., fake jobs given to upper level employees.

According to a recent article in *Scientific American*, the Army Corps of Engineers, which oversaw a \$14 billion upgrade to the city's floodwalls and levee systems, now says that the flood barriers will be inadequate in about four years' time. The upgrade, which began after the devastating flooding following

the breakdown of the levees after Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, took over 10 years to complete and less than a year after completion is now facing scrutiny from experts for its inadequacy to handle rising sea levels and more frequent “hundred year floods.” The levees and concrete floodwalls which make up the “backbone” of the city’s flood protection system are sinking at a faster rate than expected back in 2007 due to soft soils and increased water levels.

Emily Vuxton, policy director for a local environmental group said of the Army Corps’ findings, warned, “These systems that maybe were protecting us before are no longer going to be able to protect us without adjustments,” adding that said adjustments will require “hundreds of millions” of dollars. According to a 2016 report from the National Academy of Sciences, New Orleans, along with Jakarta, Indonesia; Manila, Philippines; and Bangkok, will be among the hardest-hit cities in the world if sea levels rise due to global warming, according to current projections. A report released by NASA that same year found that New Orleans was sinking at a rate of about 2 inches per year. According to the report, this combined with current trends in sea level rise has the city underwater by 2100.

Last week saw the Army Corps opening up a historic flood control structure for the second time in one year, an extraordinary event that has not occurred at that frequency since the spillway was constructed in the 1930s. David Ramirez, the chief of water management, told reporters, “It’s an unprecedented amount of water that’s coming down.” Indeed, so-called 100-year floods are occurring with increased frequency, with some experts saying there is now about a 4 percent chance each year of them occurring.

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