Pressure increases on DWP after more water main breaks

By Kevin Modesti, Staff Writer
Updated: 09/16/2009 07:56:23 PM PDT

Two more water mains in the San Fernando Valley burst early Wednesday, turning up the pressure on the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and infrastructure experts to explain the seeming epidemic of underground pipe failures this month.

One theory being floated was that the trouble is an unintended consequence of the city's water-conservation ordinance limiting lawn sprinkler use to Mondays and Thursdays before 9 a.m. and after 4 p.m.

"We have created surges of water on Mondays and Thursdays, (and) that has created new demands on our system and increased stresses on our pipes," said Jean-Pierre Bardet, chairman of the University of Southern California department of civil and environmental engineering, and director of USC's Center on Megacities.

Bardet cautioned that this is "just a theory," but said it's worthy of further analysis.

The search for causes for the unusual wave of water-main breaks has led to speculation about how factors as prosaic as hot weather might damage a 7,200-mile network of pipes that is more than 100 years old in some spots.

The sense of alarm has been heightened by customers' worry that the DWP's billion-dollar efforts to head off further problems will lead to more rate hikes.

The more dramatic of Wednesday's breaks occurred in Woodland Hills, where a leak reported at 5 a.m. in an 8-inch line at Burbank Boulevard and Irondale Avenue interrupted water flow to 35 customers, created a 12x15-foot sinkhole and closed a residential block, according to the DWP.

The other happened in Winnetka, where a leak reported at 1:40 a.m. in an 8-inch main on Corbin Avenue at Kittridge Street caused no problems with water service or traffic, the DWP said.

These developments came on top of 12 major pipe bursts in the first 13 days of September, including two incidents three days apart that caused flooding in Studio City and a sinkhole in Valley Village that nearly swallowed a fire truck.

"All the council members are concerned," said City Councilman Dennis Zine, whose district was the site of Wednesday's breaks. "Obviously it inconveniences the public. On top of that, with all our talk about conservation, we're seeing water being wasted."
Speaking by phone from Washington, D.C., Zine said the City Council expects a report from the DWP on the locations and causes of the recent ruptures and what Southern California’s largest water provider is doing to repair its aging web of pipes.

In an e-mailed statement responding to Daily News questions, the DWP said the recent pipe bursts are not an "epidemic." The department said it experiences 1,400 breaks a year, and this year has been normal overall. Of those breaks, the DWP statement said, about 200 affect customers, close streets or cause flooding.

The agency noted that it is in the middle of a capital improvement program, having invested $1.3 billion in the past five years to make improvements in delivery systems and planning to spend twice as much in the next five years on the same project.

No further rate increases have been proposed, the DWP said.

The utility said it hasn’t reached conclusions about the causes of individual leaks and won’t speculate or address theories. But one expert on water delivery speculated Wednesday that repair efforts could be causing further problems because shutting off one section of pipes increases pressure on others.

A lot of talk Wednesday centered on how temperature changes above ground could cause pipe problems below.

Weather is the most common cause of water-main breaks nationwide, said Greg Kail, director of public affairs for the Denver-based American Water Works Association.

"The earth gets warmer than the pipe and creates a temperature differential between the soil and the water, and that stress causes the pipe to break," Kail said.

Some observers suggested the cluster of problems is a coincidence, that the depth of the crisis is being exaggerated as the more eye-catching pipe bursts draw media attention to more mundane cases like Wednesday’s in Winnetka.

Others pointed out that in suffering the effects of an aging water system, Los Angeles is far from alone among the world's big cities.

Of his theory that drought-time water conservation is contributing to the pipe bursts, USC's Bardet said: "I'm not saying we should scrap the programs. But we should look at the big picture."

Bardet said the city can take advantage of this month's "warning sign" if it finds the causes and take steps to prevent the more serious water-main failures that could occur in an earthquake or fire.

Map of water main breaks in Southern California follows on the next page.

**Source of article and map:** http://www.dailynews.com/breakingnews/ci_13351739
Los Angeles water main breaks
Water main breaks in Los Angeles since Saturday, September 5, 2009.
664 views - Public
Created on Sep 16 - Updated 20 hours ago
By online
Rate this map - Write a comment

Water main break
Saturday, Sept. 5, 2009: A water main broke flooding

Water main break
Tuesday, Sept. 8, 2009: A water main ruptured on Hai

Water main break
Wednesday, Sept. 9, 2009: A water main broke on Hi

Water main break
Wednesday, Sept. 9, 2009: A water main ruptured on

Water main break
Saturday, Sept. 12, 2009: A water main ruptured on IV

Water main break
Tuesday, Sept. 15, 2009: A water main ruptured near

Water main break
Wednesday, Sept. 16, 2009: A water main ruptured in

Water main break
Wednesday, Sept. 16, 2009: A water main ruptured

Report a problem