

Texas losing billions of gallons to annual water leaks

15.2% of Houston's water supply went down the drains last year

by Cindy Horswell
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At a time when the Lone Star State is facing a grave water shortage and its population is expected to double by 2060, billions of gallons are hemorrhaging from Texas' leaky old pipes.

The exact loss is unknown as only 10 percent of the state's 3,500 utilities were required to report their 2012 losses. But in Houston, enough water seeped from broken pipes to supply 383,000 residents for one year.

According to city records, Houston pipelines gushed 22.4 billion gallons of water in 11,343 leaks last fiscal year. That equates to about 15.2 percent of the city's total water supply.

No state standard exists on an acceptable loss rate, but some utilities manage to hold their losses to single digits.

Proposition 6, which Texas voters approved last month, could help fund some Houston pipeline improvements since 20 percent of the \$2 billion was set aside for statewide conservation efforts. The fund is designed to secure the state water supply for the next 50 years.

"We are still working on establishing the rules for using this money. It should be available by 2015," said John Sutton, Texas Water Development spokesman.

Mayor Annise Parker's spokeswoman, Jessica Michan, said the city plans to go after the conservation funds.

Michan said the city already has a separate request in with the TWD for \$71 million to rebuild 130 miles of pipe. That request is still pending.

Alvin Wright, Houston's public works spokesman, said it would take an "astronomical sum"- several billion dollars - to upgrade Houston's entire system.

As an example of the high cost, Houston spent \$54 million last year on permanent fixes, which reconstructed only about 1 percent of the lines beneath the city. Another \$31 million was spent patching leaks.

"It's a balancing act, trying to determine what will be most cost-effective, when to switch from patching to reconstruction," Wright said.

Some pipes are ancient

Some of the city's water pipes date back nearly a century, and about 40 percent are being used past the average 50-year life expectancy.

With the leaks comes the inconvenience to residents and business owners of not being able to flush or wash. In addition, many of the leaks are occurring under busy thoroughfares.

Westheimer's 19 miles of east-west roadway - lined with everything from upscale shops and cafés to tattoo parlors and strip joints - sprouted more water leaks than any other street in the city last year. Work crews had to dig up a water pipeline somewhere along Westheimer almost weekly to make 43 different repairs, city records show.

Nearly 100 Houston streets experienced 10 or more leaks last year. Richmond Avenue, once known as the "street of Dreamz" for its entertainment zone, came in second with a nightmare of 37 leaks to fix. This included six in one block near the Galleria.

We're not alone

Other Texas municipalities still struggling with double-digit losses for 2012 include: Dallas (17.6 percent), San Antonio (16.04 percent), Lubbock (12.1 percent) and Laredo (10.7 percent).

However, several cities where the 2011 drought still has not been quenched continue to be pressured by a scarce water supply and have reduced their losses to single digits.

Austin, for instance, has cut its leak rate to 8.45 percent as its water supply reservoirs remain filled to only 36 percent capacity.

"We have to conserve. Every drop counts. It's a huge deal. We're in a dryer time, getting less water while adding more people," said Jill Mayfield, Austin's spokeswoman.

Last year, the capital city's taxpayers also approved a five-year \$125 million plan to upgrade its aging waterlines and keep pace with a growing city, she said.

Corpus Christi (7.33 percent) and Waco (6.32 percent) also are performing admirably, and San Angelo showed the most progress with only 4.75 percent leakage.

A strong motivation

San Angelo has perhaps the strongest motivation to conserve, as it has only a 16-month supply of water left if it does not receive any additional rainfall, said city spokesman Anthony Wilson.

The city also experienced a catastrophic water main break just days before Christmas in 2007 that cut the supply of water to most of the town. Since then, the city no longer delays replacing outmoded infrastructure, officials said.

"Although it's harder for big cities with older systems like Houston - every utility must work to eliminate waste and loss in its system as water grows more expensive," said Jace Houston, secretary of the Region H Water Planning Group that covers the greater Houston region.

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