Power Failure Blamed in New Orleans Water Issues

JANET McCONNAUGHEY,Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Taps in New Orleans briefly went dry Sunday after a boiler's heating flame went out of control in the immense steam generator that powers pumps for the city's water treatment plant.

Marcia St. Martin, executive director of the city's Sewerage and Water Board, said the outage lasted less than 20 minutes Sunday morning. Twitter came alive with residents bemoaning the loss about 9 a.m. Central time, and Mayor Mitch Landrieu tweeted to his followers that the city was looking into the matter.

The loss of pressure opened the way for possible contamination and water samples are being taken citywide, she said.

She said all sample collection should be complete by Sunday afternoon, and results should be available about 24 hours later. It takes that long to detect high levels of intestinal bacteria that could cause diarrhea.

Until the results are in, officials said, more than 300,000 residents on the Mississippi River's east bank should boil water for drinking, brushing their teeth, preparing food or anything else that might bring tap water into their bodies.

"For most of us, baths are fine," city health officer Karen DeSalvo said. The exceptions are people with low immune systems, open wounds, babies or small children. Infants and small children should be given sponge baths.

Most of New Orleans, including the French Quarter and Central Business District, is on the east bank. The treatment plant there provides about 135 million gallons of drinking water a day, compared with 11 million from the west bank treatment plant.

In October, city officials were criticized because they did not put out a notice that tap water might be contaminated until four hours after a brief shutdown at the east bank plant.

On Sunday, Water pressure at the main gauge had never fallen below the state's threshold of 15 pounds per square inch for boil advisories, but a precautionary notice was issued after hours of consultation with state Department of Health and Hospitals officials, city spokesman Ryan Berni wrote in an email.

A power problem in November 2010 also created similar conditions.

Across the city Sunday, some residents and businesses prepared water supplies to use under the boil advisory. At Zeus' Place, a pet boarding and daycare business, owner Michelle Ingram said she was using bottled water for the 80 dogs and 7 cats there.

"We were sitting on 20 gallons of water and I just got 21 more," she said. "Which should last us through tomorrow afternoon — and hopefully we'll know then whether or not the boil water order is still on."

In December 2010, after a brief power failure that did not require a boil water advisory, officials said that had been the fourth failure since the facility opened in 1903. All four were after Hurricane Katrina.

About $131 million from the Federal Emergency Management Agency has gone into work at the plant since Hurricane Katrina, St. Martin said.

She said the city is about to begin $141 million in post-Katrina work to improve and stabilize the power system with FEMA hazard mitigation grants.

The FEMA work will include installing water towers that could keep pressure high in the transmission pipes in case of a power failure. The city currently has only two, one in the farthest reaches of its west bank area and the other in eastern New Orleans.

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