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Storms Strain U.S. Sewer Systems

BY KATE KING
AND VALERIE BAUERLEIN

In the days after Hurricane Irma slammed Brunswick, Ga., most businesses and restaurants were shut down. The problem wasn't just flooding or hurricane damage, it was also untreated sewage mixing with floodwater, seeping out of manholes and overwhelming an aging system of pipes and pumps.

Residents were asked not to take showers, wash dishes or flush toilets for four days, and schools were closed for more than a week. Crews, facing extensive power outages, worked to bring the sewage system back online in order to restore service.

Downtown sandwich shop Wrap Happy had no damage or flooding, but lost days of business because the water and sewer restrictions made it difficult for evacuees to return home and kept life from getting back to normal.

"It shut down our customer base," said Taneka Beasley, whose family owns Wrap Happy.

The Brunswick-Glynn Joint Water & Sewer Commission, which serves about 30,000 residential and commercial sewer customers and treats about eight million gallons of wastewater a day, said on its website that the area saw widespread sewer overflows but the wastewater "contained very dilute and minimal human waste."

Hurricanes Harvey and Irma killed dozens of people, destroyed thousands of homes, and caused flooding that has lasted weeks in some cases. They also exposed the failings of aging sewer systems that were unable to cope with the heavy rainfall and flooding. As a result, many released untreated sewage into streets, rivers and homes of affected towns and counties.

Local governments in Florida have filed more than 250 notices of pollution with state regulators in the days since Irma made landfall in southwest Florida. In Texas, two wastewater treatment facilities in Harris County were destroyed by Harvey, and eight others remain nonoperational in five counties including Harris three weeks after the record-setting rainfall.

It is impossible to design sewage treatment facilities that can handle every storm, experts said, and recent hurricanes have delivered unprecedented rainfall and flooding in some areas.

But the recent storms magnified a problem that occurs regularly across the country, albeit on a smaller scale: sewage spills from overburdened and underfunded wastewater treatment systems.

"We're still in a place where there's not enough funding to really take care of this underground infrastructure," said Re-

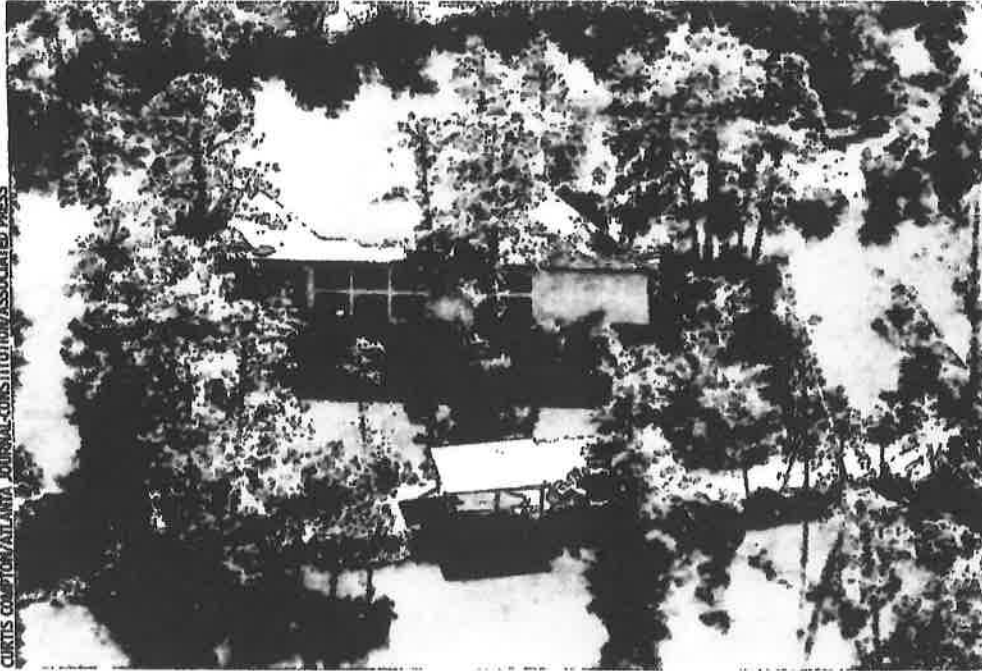
becca Shelton, an Atlanta-based member of the American Society of Civil Engineers specializing in wastewater treatment.

Sewage spills can contaminate drinking water, kill fish and close beaches to swimmers. The Environmental Protection Agency, which regulates water quality under the federal Clean Water Act of 1972, said that while sewage spills have significantly decreased over the past 40 years, 23,000 to 75,000 sewer overflows still occur in the U.S. every year.

The EPA works with states to provide low-cost loans to municipal treatment plants for capital and environmental projects, and last year awarded \$7.6 billion in funding. But the brunt of operation and infrastructure costs for the nation's sewer systems are paid by customers.

Most American wastewater treatment facilities are operated by local governments as public utilities that charge rates based on usage, said Matt Fabian, partner at the research firm Municipal Market Analytics. Costs have increased in recent years as sewage systems grapple with meeting new federal environmental regulations and more consistent or extreme weather events as well as regular maintenance costs, he said.

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CURTIS COMPTON/ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION/ASSOCIATED PRESS

A home on St. Simons Island, off the Georgia coast, was surrounded by water after Hurricane Irma.

Nursing Home's License Suspended

A Florida health-care regulator on Wednesday suspended the license of a nursing home tied to the deaths of eight patients after Hurricane Irma knocked out its air conditioning.

The order came a day after the Rehabilitation Center at Hollywood Hills sued the state to block two previous orders, both of which effectively shut down the home. Under direction from Gov. Rick Scott, the state has taken several steps to stop operations at the facility following the deaths last week.

The nursing home's resi-

dents "did not receive timely medical care because the trained medical professionals at the facility overwhelmingly delayed calling 911," Florida's Agency for Health Care Administration said, citing initial findings from an investigation.

Kirsten Ullman, the nursing home's co-counsel, said in a statement that nursing-home staff "continuously monitored" patients, and multiple medical professionals attended patients in the hours leading up to the emergency evacuation. She said the state's allegations "simply do not describe the conditions observed by these multiple caregivers."

—Melanie Evans
and Jon Kamp

The Dallas Morning News

Texas' Leading Newspaper

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Thursday, September 21, 2017

STATE

Engineers: Dams, roads need major work

AUSTIN — When it comes to the state's bridges, roads and other infrastructure, Texas has work to do, according to a national engineering group.

The American Society of Civil Engineers gave Texas a C- in its 2017 report card released Thursday, noting that Hurricane Harvey serves as a reminder of the value of infrastructure.

The group evaluated seven categories of infrastructure. According to the report card's scale, a B means infrastructure is adequate, a C indicates general deterioration and a D shows

that it's at risk.

The categories and Texas' grades were: Aviation (B-), Bridges (B), Dams (D), Drinking Water (D+), Flood Control (D), Highways and Roads (D) and Wastewater (D).

Texas did improve its grades in aviation, bridges, dams and drinking water since the last evaluation in 2012.

The engineers attributed the state's D in flood control to the fact that local authorities are still largely responsible for flood preparation, floodplain management and flood prevention, with no

state-level authority.

They also noted that dams are aging quickly, and despite Texas being a national leader in the condition of its bridges, 50 percent of them have been in use for over 40 years, while 20 percent have been in use for 60 years. Most of the bridges were built with a design life of 50 years.

The state's report card recommended long-term, increased and consistent state and local investment to help raise the state's infrastructure grades.

Jackie Wang

LEWISVILLE LEADER

Starlocalmedia.com

Sunday, September 17, 2017

VOICES

Water rates pay for #More Than Water

Clean drinking water is critical to public health and safety. We can't live without this essential resource that is delivered to north Texas homes and businesses for about a penny per gallon.

That cost pays for much more than the water itself. Behind your faucets is a network of pipes, pumps, facilities and people that take raw water from lakes and other sources, treat it, test it and transport it to your home or business around the clock. The North Texas Municipal Water District (NTMWD) is a non-profit regional provider that supplies treated drinking water to more than 1.6 million people in 13 member cities and over 60 other communities across north Texas. The cost of maintaining and expanding the infrastructure needed to provide this vital resource is increasing, and we must raise the wholesale rate to cover those costs.

In late September, the NTMWD Board of Directors will consider a proposed increase of 25-cents per 1,000 gallons of treated water. The current rate is \$2.53 per 1,000 gallons, and if approved, the wholesale water rate will increase to \$2.78. Cities set their own rates above that to cover the local costs to store and manage the distribution of water to their customers.

About 85% of the rate charged by NTMWD funds the costs to operate, maintain, upgrade and expand the infrastructure needed to keep the regional system delivering safe, reliable water. The remaining 15% pays for the actual water consumed, including the chemicals and power to treat that water and deliver it to the cities we serve. We are not alone. Across the nation, water rates are going up. And with the rapid growth in our service area, the water system must grow to ensure reliable supplies for the future.

We're responsibly planning and investing in new water sources to meet future needs. Our largest water project (more than 10 years in the making) is the proposed \$1.2-billion Lower Bois d'Arc Creek Reservoir. Federal agencies are reviewing the last permit needed, and NTMWD is preparing for construction to begin in early 2018. Another water supply project under construction is the \$120-million Trinity River Main Stem Pump Station and Pipeline scheduled for completion in early 2019. Both projects are critical for the future of north Texas.



**TOM
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Star Local Media
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LEWISVILLE LEADER

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Sunday, September 17, 2017

Water rates pay for #More Than Water

The NTMWD wholesale water rate also funds required system improvements. Our original water treatment plant in Wylie, which began operation in 1956, is undergoing significant upgrades.

NTMWD is investing nearly \$150 million for necessary improvements at all four of the Wylie water treatment plants – increasing capacity, installing new filters and upgrading treatment processes. In the northern part of our water delivery system, more than 11 miles of new pipelines will be constructed as well as a new ground storage tank to maintain system pressure.

NTMWD also provides wastewater conveyance and treatment services to one million people across 24 communities. The regional wastewater conveyance system and 14 treatment plants operated by NTMWD also need over \$125 million in

upgrades and expansions, including at the Rowlett Creek treatment plant in Plano, the Stewart Creek West plant in Frisco and the Wilson Creek plant in Lucas. Next year, improvements are planned at the Floyd Branch regional treatment plant in Richardson. Each city pays a share of the costs based on its flows into the wastewater systems in addition to charges for water service.

While it may seem like nothing is different about the water flowing in and out of your home, there's a lot that goes into keeping these essential services "out of sight and out of mind." Your water rates pay for #MoreThanWater.

For more information about the regional systems operated by the North Texas Municipal Water District, visit www.NTMWD.com.

The opinions that appear in the "Voices" section are not necessarily those of Star Local Media. Send your letter to the editor to lmcgathey@starlocalmedia.com.

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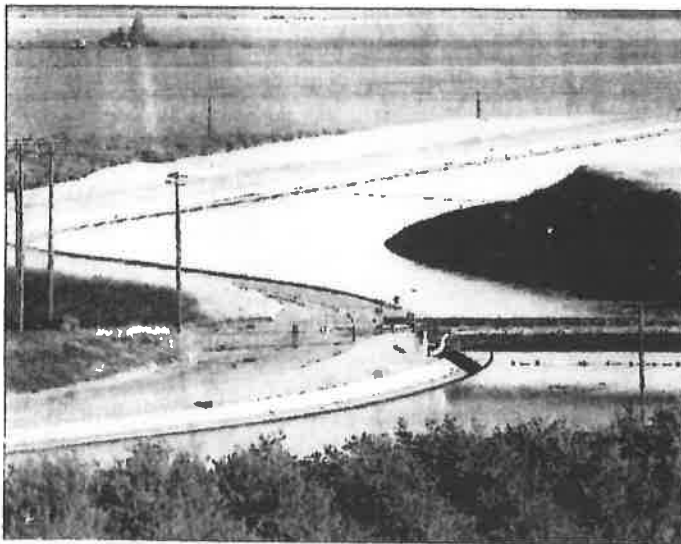
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Saturday, September 9, 2017

CALIFORNIA

Audit: Taxpayer cash misused for water project



2009 File Photo/The Associated Press

Federal officials illegally contributed taxpayer money to a plan to build two giant tunnels to carry water from Northern California south, an audit found. Central Valley's Westlands Water District received one of the largest shares of the federal money.

Federal agency paid \$85 million toward tunnel planning costs

SAN FRANCISCO — The U.S. Interior Department improperly contributed tens of millions of dollars in taxpayer money to help California and politically powerful state water districts plan for a massive project to ship the state's water from north to south, a new federal audit said Friday.

Federal officials contributed \$85 million to help finance the water districts' plan, backed by Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown, to build two giant water tunnels to re-engineer the state's water system, according to the audit by the inspector general's office of the U.S. Interior Department obtained by The Associated Press.

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CALIFORNIA

Audit: Taxpayer cash misused for water project

By California law and by an agreement by the water districts, California water districts and not taxpayers are supposed to bear the costs of the \$16 billion project, the audit said. Brown and the then-secretary of the Interior Department, affirmed that in a joint 2011 public statement supporting the tunnels plan. The proposed tunnels are part of Brown's decades-long push for a project that would more readily carry water south from green Northern California, mainly for use by cities and farms in central and Southern California. Voters rejected an early version of the proposal in a statewide vote in the 1980s.

California water districts are making final decisions on whether to go ahead with the controversial project. Federal authorities did not fully disclose to Congress or the

public that it was supplying \$84.8 million for project planning, and waived reimbursement for \$50 million of it, the audit said. The federal Reclamation Bureau did not disclose the arrangement in its certified financial reports, the audit said. "USBR could not provide us with a rationale for its decision to subsidize [California] water contractors, other than the water contractors asked USBR to pay," the audit noted. The actions by the Bureau of Reclamation, which is part of the Interior Department, mean that federal taxpayers paid a third of the cost of the project's planning up to 2016, the audit said.

Meanwhile, Central Valley water districts that were supposed to pay 50 percent of the tunnels' planning costs contributed only 18 percent, the audit found.

California officials have consis-

tently said no taxpayer money was being spent on the project. Asked if auditors wanted contractors to repay the money, Interior spokeswoman Nancy DiPaolo said, "We certainly hope so." That decision was up to California, she said.

Thomas Birmingham, general manager of the sprawling Central Valley rural water district Westlands, which received one of the largest shares of the federal money, said he knew of nothing about the arrangement that was "inconsistent with either state or federal law."

"The state was aware of it," Birmingham said of the federal payments. "No one indicated this was somehow a violation of the letter or spirit of the agreement" guiding the costs of the project.

*Ellen Knickmeyer,
The Associated Press*