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DWP urges change to lawn-watering rules to ease strain on aging pipes

Users with odd-numbered street addresses would get two days a week and those with even-numbered addresses would get a different two.

May 19, 2010 | By Robert J. Lopez, Los Angeles Times

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power on Tuesday proposed changes to lawn-watering regulations aimed at preventing fluctuations in pressure blamed for widespread pipe ruptures that caused millions of dollars' worth of damage.

The plan, which must be approved by the City Council because it requires a change in city water-rationing laws, would divide water users into two groups that would water their landscaping on different days.

Currently, sprinkler use is allowed Mondays and Thursdays for 15 minutes or less per watering station.

In April, a panel of scientists said the water-line breaks that blew holes in city streets and flooded businesses last summer and fall were caused, in part, by the changes in water pressure resulting from the twice-weekly rationing schedule, which stressed the city's aging pipe system.

From July through September 2009, the city recorded 101 major breaks, up from 42 for the same months in 2008 and 49 for the same period in 2007, the report found.

During the DWP meeting Tuesday, Jim McDaniel, head of the utility's water system, acknowledged that the changes in water pressure needed to be reduced. But the utility said its internal review found that fluctuations caused by a major break in early September were a more likely cause of the increase in blowouts that followed.

Under the new proposal, residents and business operators with odd-numbered street addresses would be allowed to use sprinklers Monday and Thursday. Those at even-numbered addresses could water Tuesday and Friday. Using sprinklers between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. would still be prohibited.

Councilman Paul Koretz, whose district includes areas where several major breaks occurred, said he was pleased with the DWP's action. But he said he would recommend to his council colleagues that the watering cycles be shorter and spread out over two three-day periods.

"It would be less likely to contribute to water-line breaks," Koretz said of his modified plan.

The pipe ruptures proved to be an embarrassment for the DWP and the city. Officials began noticing an increase shortly after water-rationing rules were imposed in June 2009.

The problem was highlighted Sept. 5 when a 5-foot-wide line below Coldwater Canyon Avenue in Studio City broke, blasting a 10-foot geyser of water and mud through the pavement and into the air. The busy thoroughfare was shut down for a week and businesses in the area suffered major damage and a loss of customers.

That incident was followed by a blowout in Valley Village less than 72 hours later, which caused a sinkhole that partially swallowed a city firetruck.

The water main breaks have prompted more than 100 claims for damages against the city. At least 25 of those have been paid, city officials have said. The financial terms of those settlements were not available Tuesday evening.

City officials said the rationing program has been successful, in part because of residents who have reported abusers to the DWP.

Councilwoman Jan Perry said she plans to request that the DWP launch an education and outreach program about the new restrictions. She said she also wants to ensure that the utility works with people who want to report violations but might not be sure about the exact address.

"If you just have a cross street, that's good too," Perry said. "We want people to help us. We don't want to discourage them."

Joe Ramallo, a DWP spokesman, said the agency plans to conduct aggressive community outreach through the media and with promotional materials.

"Our water conservation team members will be out in the communities to help get the message out," he said.

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