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ACT OF DESPERATION

Residents of the borough of Iztapalapa help themselves to potable water from a city water pipe access tunnel. Capital authorities issued warnings that they will punish those caught wasting water.

PHOTO NEWS



City to issue fines for those wasting water

Ahead of cutoffs, officials warn

BY NACHA CATTAN
The News

Mexico City residents who leave their faucets running or hose down their gardens and cars during water shutoffs this week risk arrest of up to 36 hours, capital officials warned Tuesday.

City police will be on the alert, especially on Holy Saturday, when residents have traditionally engaged in large-scale water fights despite laws banning them. Offenders could also be fined up to 1,644 pesos.

"We strongly urge residents to abstain from these practices, which affect the supply of this vital liquid," the city government said in a Tuesday statement.

The city has also warned it will begin permanent shutdowns of water service for homeowners and businesses that owe more than 5,000 pesos in water bills.

Federal authorities will suspend close to 30 percent of all water service in Mexico City for 36 hours starting Thursday. But city officials warn that water pressure will not return to normal in some areas until nearly one week later, on April 15.

Drought conditions at nearby reservoirs and emergency repairs on aqueducts will leave millions in the metropolitan area with a 100-percent shutdown, city officials say.

In Mexico City, at least 700,000 people in 337 neighborhoods across 13 boroughs will be affected by shortages, city water authorities say. Residents in middle-class neighborhoods such as

Condesa and Roma, as well as those in posh Lomas de Chapultepec, will join working-class boroughs accustomed to shortages in losing their water service.

In the State of Mexico, the suspension will affect close to 2 million people in 13 municipalities, including Ecatepec, Naucalpan and Toluca. Both Mexico City and the State of Mexico will send out 750 water trucks to neighborhoods hit most severely.

The National Water Commission, or Conagua, said Tuesday that reservoirs east of the capital are at historic lows, with some having dropped to 29.6 percent capacity. The commission may have to permanently reduce water delivery from the Cutzamala system by 12.5 percent if rains don't replenish water levels, Conagua director José Luis Luege said.

But Luege played down the effects of this week's cutoffs, saying the suspension of the Cutzamala system of rivers and reservoirs will only reduce 20 percent of the metropolitan area's water. "If there is a total lack of potable water in Mexico City, it won't be due to the cuts, but because Mexico City poorly distributes water," Luege said.

The most pressing issue, Luege said, is for city officials to repair leaky pipes in secondary networks, where close to 40-percent of water is lost, and for which the city is to blame.

Mexico City's lack of water has become a highly politicized issue of late, and the small Social Democratic Party, or PSD, on Tuesday called on Conagua and Mexico City authorities to put differences aside and cooperate to solve the water crisis. The PSD also warned

against using water repairs to leverage votes for July's midterms.

A city plan to replace dozens of pipes in neighborhoods with shortages is not going to achieve much, except gain political points, said PSD Assemblyman Enrique Pérez Correa. Instead, authorities must "correct every step in the water cycle to prevent leaks and increase efficiency," he said.

—WITH REPORTING FROM NOTIMEX



Mexico City residents demand their right to water ahead of the rationing.