

13 Things You Probably Don't Know About the U.S. Water System (But Should)

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It's been a rough year for the U.S. water system already, and it's only summer.

Two U.S. cities (Charleston, West Virginia, and Toledo, Ohio) have gone for days with no safe water service. The nation's largest reservoir is lower than it's ever been. The nation's largest state is in the worst drought ever recorded.

Here are some statistics that sum up the condition of the U.S. water system, **which in a word are not good.**

- The U.S. has 1.2 million miles of water supply mains — 26 miles of water mains for every mile of interstate highway.
- **The U.S. water system has become so old that, on average, every mile of water pipe suffers a break every six years.**
- **U.S. water pipes leak one full day's water for every seven days. That is, U.S. water utilities lose one out of seven gallons of drinking water they supply before it arrives at a customer.**
- **Many cities have centuries-long replacement cycles for their water pipes. Los Angeles and Philadelphia both have a 300-year replacement cycle. Washington, D.C. has a 200-year water pipe replacement cycle.**
- The water system is often out-of-date in surprising ways. In Sacramento, California's capital, half the water customers have no water meters, so in the midst of the state's worst drought in history, they pay a flat fee no matter how much water they use. In New York, the city's largest apartment complex, Peter Cooper Village/Stuyvesant Town, has 11,232 units — and no water meters.
- **The average water bill for a family of four in the U.S. is \$34 a month—\$1 a day.**
- As recently as 1950, more than one-third of U.S. homes lacked indoor plumbing.
- Water circumstances change quickly and dramatically. Lake Mead, at 110 miles long the largest reservoir in the U.S., supplies 30 million people with water. In 2000, Lake Mead was virtually full. Today, it is only 39% full, lower than it has been since it was filled in May 1937.
- In the U.S., 8% of municipal water is cleaned and re-used. Singapore recycles 30% of its water. Israel recycles 70%.
- The largest use of water in the U.S. is for generating electric power. Power plants take 49% of the water used each day, mostly for cooling. Irrigation for agriculture is the second largest user of water at 31%. Piped water from utilities, for homes and businesses, is 11% of water use.
- Four states account for 25% of all water used in the U.S.: California, Texas, Idaho, Florida. (Two of those, California and Texas, are in the third year of serious drought.)
- Bottled water sales in the U.S. hit an all time high in 2013, when Americans bought 10 billion gallons. That's 32 gallons of bottled water a year per person—equal to 5 half-liter bottles for every man, woman and child every week.
- Americans spent \$25 billion on bottled water at retail in 2013. The country spent \$29 billion maintaining the entire water infrastructure.

Charles Fishman is a journalist and author of *The Big Thirst*. Hear him on NPR.