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L.A. sees increase in 'major blowouts' in water system; officials eye rate hike to cover fixes

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There is a mystery coursing beneath the streets of Los Angeles.

Every few days, another clue comes shooting up to the surface. A few recent ones include a geyser that flooded homes and businesses in Sherman Oaks, a sinkhole that almost swallowed a firetruck in Valley Village and a small flood near the tony shopping district on Melrose Avenue.

After each of these water main breaks, which took place over the last 10 days, Department of Water and Power officials were quick to point out that leaks are nothing out of the ordinary. Los Angeles has about 1,400 ruptures a year in its 7,200 miles of pipe, a decrease over past years and a rate-per-mile-of-pipe that is much better than other cities with aging infrastructure.

But as they analyzed these incidents more closely, DWP engineers uncovered a conundrum: Though the number of leaks citywide is down, the numbers that are “major blowouts” in which water comes shooting up through pavement, wreaking havoc and racking up the repair bills, is up over the last three months. And engineers have no idea why.

The most recent blowout was Tuesday morning, when a broken main on Exposition Boulevard caused officials to close the thoroughfare between Crenshaw and Degnan boulevards and cut off water to several local businesses.

James McDaniels, who is in charge of water operations for the DWP, told commissioners Tuesday that the uptick in “major blowouts” is “not to the point we can’t handle it.”

But he also noted that in order to complete repairs to aging infrastructure, DWP officials plan to ask the City Council to approve an increase in water rates in the next few years. DWP officials say the rate increase has long been factored into their plans, but some on the City Council said they were unhappy to hear of it.

“They have to make a case for that,” said Councilwoman Jan Perry. She also said she was concerned to hear about the increase in major blowouts, and took “no comfort” from the fact that Los Angeles’ rate of leaks is lower than other cities. “We have to get to the cause as to why this has increased. People can get hurt. Property can be lost,” she said.

Some speculated that there has been an increase in leaks because of strange summer weather, which has fluctuated between hot and cold, stressing pipes.

--Jessica Garrison