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Three more L.A. water mains rupture

The breaks in the Hollywood Hills and South Los Angeles cause flooding and street closures. But DWP officials say the recent upswing in major leaks is easing.

By Tony Barboza

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The rash of water-main breaks continued early Tuesday, with three more ruptures causing flooding and street closures in the Hollywood Hills and South Los Angeles.

But with 18 major bursts so far this month -- about average for this point in October -- water officials said the recent upswing in major leaks in the city's water system, which reached an alarming 44 in September, appears to have eased.

"It's settled down," said Joe Ramallo, a spokesman for the Department of Water and Power. "For October we're well back to normal and for September we saw an increase, but that very well may have been a statistical blip."

Still, officials have scrambled for possible explanations.

The latest breaks pushed the tally of major blowouts since Sept. 1 to 62. The agency defines a significant leak as one that damages more than 100 square feet of pavement.

Tuesday's ruptures began about 2 a.m. when a 12-inch steel water main ruptured in the 13600 block of Mulholland Drive near Beverly Ranch Road, sending water flowing into surrounding streets and homes and closing Mulholland Drive from Coldwater Canyon Avenue to Benedict Canyon Drive, DWP officials said.

Early Tuesday, water bubbled up through fractured pavement on the north side of Mulholland, and cascaded downhill near homes, streaming into several backyards, covering a tennis court and a backyard pool, but not causing serious damage.

Minutes later, at 2:07 a.m., fire officials responded to a report of a possible sinkhole at 83rd and Wall streets in South Los Angeles. A 6-inch cast-iron water main had broken, spewing mud and debris into the street. Later in the morning, law enforcement directed traffic as children jumped over the sidewalk-high water on their way to school.

A third break was reported at 2:29 a.m. a few miles away at Florence and Van Ness avenues, officials said. A pipe burst in the intersection, breaking and lifting the asphalt. The intersection was closed as crews repaired the damage.

The big pipe blowouts, which have become a much-discussed occurrence, flooding streets, buckling pavement and opening up sinkholes across the city, have puzzled Los Angeles officials, who are seeking explanations.

City engineers are analyzing each break and have been taking soil samples as part of an investigation of whether Los Angeles' water rationing program, which allows sprinklers to run only on Mondays and Thursdays, could be to blame.

Earlier this month, the DWP enlisted the help of Jet Propulsion Laboratory scientists, who are studying whether

tectonic activity from recent earthquakes has played a role in cracking open Los Angeles' aging water system.

Officials have stressed that the city's 7,200 miles of pipe are not actually leaking more than usual -- in fact, the number of leaks, about 1,400 a year, is down from the past. But recent bursts, peaking in September, have gushed more water and been more destructive.

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Times photographers Irfan Khan and Al Seib contributed to this report.

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