

**GUEST VIEWPOINT**  
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## **EWEB aims to prevent West Virginia-style water disaster**

**By Lance Robertson**

The chemical that spilled into a West Virginia river on Jan. 9 might seem like a world away from Eugene. But there's an eerie "what if" parallel to the event that deprived 300,000 West Virginians of clean drinking water.

Like the area affected in West Virginia, Eugene is served by a single source of water. In fact, of the Northwest's 20 largest cities, only Eugene lacks an alternative or backup water supply.

Fortunately, our water comes from one of the cleanest rivers in the nation — the Mc-Kenzie River. And we don't have coal-processing plants upstream from our water intake. But as in West Virginia, Eugene is just one chemical spill, earthquake or other disaster away from being out of water.

Over the past decade, the Eugene Water & Electric Board has developed one of the most comprehensive drinking water source protection efforts in the nation.

Under the guidance of Karl Morgenstern, EWEB's drinking water source protection coordinator, the utility has mapped emergency responses for every mile of the McKenzie, created innovative programs to encourage residents to voluntarily fix leaky septic systems and remove chemicals from the watershed, partnered with other nonprofit groups such as the McKenzie River Trust to leverage grants for restoration and habitat protection efforts, and monitors the main river and tributaries to identify potential threats to water quality.

But all those efforts don't address the largest threat — a natural disaster or catastrophic equipment failure that cuts off our water supply or renders our water undrinkable for days or weeks. EWEB has about three days' supply of water stored in its reservoirs. Emergency interties with neighboring utilities can provide some, but not enough, water to meet Eugene's basic health and safety needs. Additional reservoir storage is very expensive. Diversification of our water supply appears to be the most viable risk-mitigation strategy.

For several years, EWEB has been doing a lot of behind-the-scenes planning to reduce the risks of a prolonged water outage. Besides seeking alternative drinking water supplies, the utility has stepped up emergency preparedness plans in cooperation with our regional partners. EWEB recently purchased and tested a trailer designed to distribute drinking water in an emergency. Over time, more of these mobile water-distribution trailers will be acquired.

The utility continues to invest in upgrading its aging water system, which includes seismic improvements to reservoirs and other key facilities. And we are embarking on a more visible campaign to raise the public's awareness of a need for alternative or backup water sources. We are looking at a number of possibilities, from the Willamette River to groundwater sources.

Improved water reliability will take time and dedicated resources. The utility's elected board of commissioners took the first step in December toward paying for this effort.

Half of the recently approved 6 percent water rate increase will go into a special reserve fund to

start saving money for water source development. That 6 percent increase – about \$1.88 a month for the average home — will be reflected in February bills.

Over the next several years, portions of other water rate increases are likely to be directed into this special savings account. The good news is that EWEB water rates are among the lowest in the Northwest.

EWEB takes seriously its responsibility to ensure the uninterrupted delivery of clean water, and has embarked on a strategic and measured path forward to diversify supplies as well as build resiliency to significant emergencies. But residents also have an important role.

With West Virginia's experience fresh in our minds, now is a good time to make sure household emergency plans are in place and that essential items are available to your family in the event of a disaster.

For more information, go to [www.eweb.org/waterreliability](http://www.eweb.org/waterreliability).

*Lance Robertson is the public affairs manager for the Eugene Water & Electric Board.*