

Cape Town is set to become the first major world city to run out of water

Day Zero, when the taps run dry, is just around the corner.



People collect drinking water from pipes fed by an underground spring, on January 19, 2018, in Cape Town. (CREDIT: RODGER BOSCH/AFP/Getty Images)

South Africa's second-largest city is set to become the first major world hub to exhaust its water supply, once its reservoirs dry up in mid-to-late April.

At least 4 million people will run out of water when that happens.

Residents of Cape Town are facing an increasingly dire situation: in less than three months, they will need to stand in line to receive individual allotments of water.

At present, those living in the city have been asked to limit themselves to 87 liters of water per day, or 23 gallons.

On February 1, that number will drop to 50 liters (13 gallons). For context, the average American uses around 100 gallons of water per day — more than seven times what Capetonians will be asked to use.



Essayez de regarder cette vidéo sur www.youtube.com

<https://youtu.be/pquArFyBkp4>

Plans for "Day Zero" — the day when taps will run dry — are even more strict, with each person limited to 6.6 gallons of water. Police and other officials will be on hand to direct crowds and contain anticipated protests and backlash.

For many in Cape Town, the logistics could grow impossibly complicated, with officials expecting insufficient water for toilets, and some residents — including the very young, elderly, and disabled — unable to physically wait in line before carting gallons of water back to their homes.

That stark reality has been met with a range of reactions.

“Until the end of last year, even until Cape Town water restrictions were at ‘Level 5,’ people in general were calm,” said Shravya Reddy, a climate change adviser at Pegasys Consulting, who is based in Cape Town.

Reddy told *ThinkProgress* that it wasn’t until this month, when the alert level reached Level 6, that many Capetonians actively began to worry.

“I think the idea of leaving one’s home, standing in line, and carrying buckets for the 25 liter quota — the associated concerns about law and order at such collection points and overall logistical challenges of this proposed system — has now sparked some real panic,” she said.

Cape Town’s crisis is years in the making. An enduring drought brought on by three years of below-average rainfall is a major underlying factor, but years of unprecedented growth coupled with a breakdown in city planning have exacerbated the problem.

Adherence to city advisories has also gone unheeded; **only 39 percent of Capetonians complied with water restrictions** in January, forcing officials to shift Day Zero predictions from April 21 to April 12. If that trend continues, taps could run dry even sooner.

Official restrictions have spurred outrage across the city. Moratoriums on water usage have led some to recycle toilet water, while others **have opted for shorter hair** in order to cope with one-and-a-half-minute shower recommendations. Restrictions on lawn watering and refilling swimming pools have been especially challenging for Cape Town’s large tourism industry.

Concern has led Capetonians to invest in large 25-liter plastic jugs of water along with a number of other water management devices. All come with their own environmental implications, but for residents, they’re rapidly becoming a necessary last-ditch resort.

Cape Town’s problems aren’t unique. The Brazilian city of São Paulo **came close to the same fate** three years ago, when its 20 million residents grappled with daily water shut-offs in response to rapidly shrinking reservoirs. Strict measures and **water brought on by the El Niño climate phenomenon** ultimately helped the drought, but São Paulo remains an at-risk city.

Others could see the same fate: experts have expressed concern about major global hubs like Tokyo and London, as well as U.S. cities like Miami.

While climate change has played a significant role in Cape Town’s problems, a lack of preparation on the part of city officials has also drawn the ire of local residents. Warnings about water scarcity go back more than a decade, but residents say the local government failed to take action.

Whatever factors are to blame for the crisis, it’s pretty clear who will disproportionately bear the brunt of Day Zero.

*“For the past seven years, we’ve seen a huge increase in the volumes of tourists visiting Cape Town,” a resident named Yves **wrote in an open letter to IOL**, a South African publication. “A large number of hotels have been built. What about the housing projects for underprivileged communities?”*

Reddy agrees, telling *ThinkProgress* those already flush with cash will largely be able to escape the crisis.

“No matter what the circumstances, people with higher income levels will fare better when water is cut off,” she said. “[They have the] ability to buy more new clothes as a response to laundry reduction, ordering takeout food as a response to less cooking and dishwashing, leaving the city for long stretches of time to escape elsewhere. People from under-resourced and low-income communities already are at a disadvantage from lack of access to adequate information — since much of what’s trickling out is through online communications — and lack of disposable income to buy stocks of drinking water in advance.”

For many disadvantaged communities, water rationing is already a way of life. **In a series of tweets on Wednesday**, one South African argued that Cape Town’s residents are experiencing something the rest of the country is already very familiar with.

“I used to wash my face, wash my armpits, brush my teeth and wash my hands with a single cup of water [...]. I used to watch my grandfather stand in front of the house every morning to [do] exactly the same,” Mail & Guardian columnist [Khaya Dlanga](#) wrote. “It’s not amazing that one can use little water for so much. What amazed me when I went to the city was how much water was used. It was shocking to me.”

***It’s not amazing that one can use little water for so much. What amazed me when I went to the city was how much water was used. It was shocking to me.
— Khaya Dlanga (@khayadlanga) January 24, 2018***

What’s not shocking, according to Reddy, is how Cape Town’s image as a “Western” city is shaping reactions to the crisis.

“I am also acutely aware that the reason Cape Town’s story has caught the world’s attention is because it is a relatively ‘Western’ city in Africa,” said Reddy. “It occurs to me that if Cape Town was less beautiful, and less of a playground to the rich and famous, the crisis may very well have been ignored altogether by global media, as most crises — environmental or political or health or economic — in Africa tend to be.”

However, Cape Town’s visibility could prove crucial for other cities.

“Most cities in the world still don’t require, by law, city planners to integrate climate change into their planning decisions and actions,” Reddy said, arguing that officials need to account for climate projections the same way they do demographic growth.

She added,

“The bottom-line is that for restrictions to have any impact, cities need to enforce them stringently. Hoping that 5 to 6 million people will all magically follow restrictions, entirely of their own volition, and limit consumption in good faith is not a winning strategy.”

Information-sharing is crucial to that improvement.

“If [governments] make an effort to educate their citizenry...this will empower the city to take more concerted action and will hopefully engender public support for more aggressive (and expensive) climate change adaptation measures,” she explained. “This doesn’t mean needlessly scaring people, but it does mean being proactive, direct, and communicative about what risks the city faces and what potential solutions the city needs to consider to ensure a more secure future for all.”

For now, preparations are underway to address Cape Town’s crisis — but they may not be moving quickly enough. After delaying construction on several desalination plants, the city is finally building several, as well as implementing a range of other water efforts. But the delay means they won’t be done for months, leaving Cape Town without water until at least the fall.

In the meantime, Reddy, like other residents, is trying to stay optimistic.

“I saw [a Facebook post] yesterday reminding people that the discomfort and challenges people will face after Day Zero are relatively mild compared to the indignities and inhumane situation the majority of South Africans faced during apartheid,” she said. “It’s a false equivalency for sure, but it nevertheless served as an important reminder of the resilience of this country and provided some measure of hope that a country that emerged from such staggering historical challenges will be able to somehow cope with — and emerge stronger from — this new form of adversity as well.”

❑ The video linked above has been corrected to show footage of President Zuma. The original featured South Africa’s Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo.

Further reading :

- [The Trump administration is ramping up its war on clean water](#)
- [There is a serious, concerted effort going on to undermine clean water.](#)