

A crisis in Kentucky shows the high cost of clean drinking water (nationwide)

By [Frances Stead Sellers](#), Washington Post
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Excerpt from article

It's been "like that" for decades here in Martin County (KY), as it has in other pockmarked parts of coal country. The water crisis peaked last year when service to many residents was shut off, members of the water board quit, and the attorney general [opened a criminal investigation](#) into allegations of mismanagement. The Kentucky House [recently passed a resolution](#) asking Gov. Matt Bevin (R) to declare a state of emergency and free up resources to fix the dilapidated system.

On Saturday, Bevin held a community forum with residents in Inez, the county seat, where he said he had not decided about the state of emergency but pledged to channel state and federal dollars toward the problem. "We've done more in the last three months than was done in the previous three years," Bevin said.

The water board's new chairman, Jimmy Don Kerr, has taken a lead role in trying to reverse the downward trend. But State Rep. Chris Harris (D), who advocated for the state of emergency, warned that Martin County's problems could soon be everyone's.

"As **the infrastructure deteriorates around the country**, we are going to see more and more Martin Counties," he said.

The challenges are monumental here in Appalachia and beyond: The American Society of Civil Engineers gave the nation's drinking-water system a D grade in its [quadrennial report card](#). The network of more than 1 million miles of pipes includes many that are a century old and have a 75-year life expectancy. Across the country, 14 percent of treated water is lost through leaks, and here in Martin County, that figure has at times reached more than 70 percent. The **American Water Works Association estimates that it will take \$1 trillion to support demand over the next 25 years**; in Martin County, repairs carry a price tag exceeding \$10 million.

President Trump, like President Barack Obama before him, touted the economic importance of repairing the country's crumbling infrastructure. Neither has succeeded. [Among the 2020 presidential candidates](#), Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) stands out for her emphasis on improving infrastructure as a major policy proposal, **calling for \$1 trillion in federal and state funds to be spent in seven areas, including updating bridges and Internet connectivity, and ensuring clean water.**

Drinking water, which is typically funded by local rates, is a particularly tough sell, with little to show for investment that is largely spent underground. Updating small systems such as Martin County's presents additional problems, experts say, because they lack economies of scale and have limited technical and managerial resources.