

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

ADMINISTRATIVE ISSUANCE SYSTEM

Mayor's Order 2026-028

February 18, 2026

SUBJECT: Declaration of Public Emergency – Potomac Interceptor Collapse and Impacts

ORIGINATING AGENCY: Office of the Mayor

By virtue of the authority vested in the Mayor of the District of Columbia pursuant to section 422(11) of the District of Columbia Home Rule Act, approved December 24, 1973, 87 Stat. 790, Pub. L. No. 93-198, D.C. Official Code § 1-204.22(11), and pursuant to section 5 of the District of Columbia Public Emergency Act of 1980 ("Public Emergency Act"), effective March 5, 1981, D.C. Law 3-149, D.C. Official Code § 7-2304, and section 2 of the Natural Disaster Consumer Protection Act of 1992 ("NDCPA"), effective March 20, 1992, D.C. Law 9-80, D.C. Official Code § 28-4102, it is hereby **ORDERED** that:

I. FINDINGS (NATURE OF THE PUBLIC EMERGENCY)

A. Potomac Interceptor Collapse and Impacts

On Monday, January 19, 2026, a section of a 72-inch diameter sewer line collapsed near the Clara Barton Parkway in Montgomery County, Maryland. The sewer line, called the Potomac Interceptor, is managed by the District of Columbia Water and Sewer Authority (DC Water), which functions as a regional utility whose infrastructure and operational impacts extend across the National Capital Region and carries up to 60 million gallons of wastewater daily from Virginia and Maryland to the Blue Plains Advanced Wastewater Treatment Plant in the District.

The sewer line collapse resulted in more than 250 million gallons of untreated sewage flowing into the Potomac River between January 19-24, 2026. A major concern with untreated sewage is the presence of *Escherichia coli* ("E. coli") bacteria. E. coli, when it reaches certain levels, is dangerous to humans. Sewage also contains other bacteria, including *Staphylococcus aureus*, the bacteria causing Staph infections, and Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* ("MRSA"), viruses, pharmaceuticals, microplastics, and harmful chemicals.

B. DC Water Initial Bypass Response

On January 24, 2026, DC Water constructed an initial bypass system that largely contained the escaped wastewater by pumping it into an empty section of the C&O Canal between Locks 10 and 12. The wastewater is then pumped back into the Potomac Interceptor, approximately a half mile downstream from the site of the collapse. Although there has been at least one interruption of the bypass due to blockages, DC Water has substantially contained the sewage and prevented sewage from flowing directly into the Potomac River.

As DC Water continues to make repairs to the Potomac Interceptor, there remains a risk for additional overflows. DC Water estimates that repairing the sewer line collapse will take between four and six weeks, assuming no further impediments to the repair work. All options to speed up this work are being explored.

C. District Government Response

Since January 19, 2026, the District has been monitoring and managing this incident in accordance with the District Emergency Operations Plan. Upon notification from DC Water on Monday, January 19, 2026, the Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency ("HSEMA") began monitoring the situation in Maryland, confirming the safety of the District's drinking water and coordinating with DC Water to provide necessary support in the repairs. HSEMA has provided regular updates to regional agencies since the break.

On Friday, February 6, 2026, HSEMA transitioned the District to an Incident Management Team model to support DC Water and prepare for ongoing impacts to the community as this incident evolves. This transition is designed to address four key needs in the community from this incident:

1. Conducting water monitoring and testing for the portions of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers in the District to protect environmental and human health;
2. Providing enhanced guidance to the community for personal, family, and pet safety required for movement and recreation around the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers;
3. Coordinating local, state, and federal information sharing;
4. Evaluating and addressing the economic impacts resulting from water contamination resulting from the sewage in the Potomac River and the diversion efforts.

D. Regional Governments' Coordinated Response

Multiple state and federal agencies are cooperating to oversee the repair operations and protect the environment, including the Maryland Department of Environment ("MDE"), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency ("EPA"), the District Department of Energy and Environment ("DOEE"), and National Park Service ("NPS"). DOEE and EPA are inspecting the bypass weekly to verify that DC Water is doing everything possible to prevent overflows, contain and mitigate any overflows that occur, as well as plan for comprehensive environmental restoration for impacted areas around the collapse site and the areas around the C & O Canal that have been harmed or fouled in the emergency repair.

E. Ongoing Potomac River Testing and Longer-Term Remediation

Utilizing a contracted environmental firm and certified laboratory, DC Water initiated daily sampling for E. coli, an indicator bacterium, at six (6) locations beginning on January 29, 2026. To assess water quality conditions, sampling locations include the overflow area as well as upstream and downstream sites. DOEE has increased the frequency of E. coli

monitoring from monthly to weekly and is exploring partnerships with the EPA to add more locations and more frequent testing. Early data has shown significant bacteria reductions in the weeks after the bypass was installed on January 24, 2026. DOEE is conducting weekly bacteria monitoring on both the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers.

F. Consequences for the District and the National Capital Region's Environment, Economy, People, Visitors, and Businesses.

As we emerge from historic cold weather and as spring progresses, persons will want to use the Potomac for recreational purposes and need to be able to do so safely. Businesses, clubs, and teams use the Potomac for a range of activities. Fishing downstream is affected if fish and aquatic life are unsafe for consumption, or perceived to be unsafe, and fish and waterborne creatures can be harmed by algal blooms and dead zones consequent to the sewage spill and diversion program. The towpath along the Canal is a popular recreation spot; people let their dogs jump in the water; and it is host to heron, turtles, and a range of other plants and animals. The District economy depends heavily on tourism, and tourists come from around the world to spring events along the Potomac, such as our Cherry Blossom Festival. Long term effects to the water table and plants that depend on it are unknown. Odor mitigation is another necessity. It is critical to the welfare of residents and visitors alike that we address the spill, and the consequences of the diversion in the most organized and expeditious manner possible; that we utilize any federal resources available; and that we have the best testing and communications systems set up so as to provide accurate information to users and potential users of the various waterfronts and water affected.

II. EMERGENCY MEASURES AND REQUIREMENTS

- A. The City Administrator, in consultation with the Director of the Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency ("HSEMA"), is authorized to implement such measures as may be necessary or appropriate to protect persons and property in the District of Columbia from the conditions caused by this incident. Such measures may include actions authorized under section 5(b) of the Public Emergency Act, D.C. Official Code § 7-2304(b), including requesting federal disaster assistance and taking measures under the District Emergency Operations Plan. Such measures may also include, where appropriate, actions to enforce the NDCPA.
- B. This Order shall apply to all District Government departments, agencies, and instrumentalities (collectively, "agencies") as necessary or appropriate to implement this Order.
- C. Procure supplies and equipment, institute training programs and public information programs, and take all other preparatory steps as we continue to understand the effects of the spill and clean up; and furnish trained and equipped personnel during

the public emergency, in coordination with emergency services plans and programs of the federal government and neighboring states, political subdivisions, and water authorities.

- D. District Government agency directors may authorize overtime for activities directly related to the District's response to the incident and temporary personnel assignments within agencies as needed to assist in the District's response to the incident.
- E. The City Administrator, in coordination with the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice, the HSEMA Director, and the CFO, is authorized to apply for financial assistance through the Federal Emergency Management Agency, any other federal, private, or nonprofit disaster relief and recovery organizations, and any other federal agencies to recoup expenditures incurred, or obtain funding needed to respond to and address the impacts of the incident.
- F. The District shall continue to manage this incident in accordance with the Emergency Operations Plan immediately. With the approval of the City Administrator, District Government agencies may take actions under the District Emergency Operations Plan without regard to established operating procedures relating to the performance of public works, entering into contracts, incurring obligations, employment of temporary workers, rental of equipment, purchase of supplies and materials, and expenditure of public funds.
- G. District Government agency directors are authorized to activate, implement, and coordinate mutual aid agreements between the District of Columbia and federal, state, or local jurisdictions as needed to assist in the District's response to the incident.
- H. Request the declaration of a major disaster from the federal government, certify the need for disaster assistance and commit the use of a certain amount of District of Columbia funds to alleviate the damage, loss, hardship, and suffering resulting from a disaster.

III. DURATION OF ORDER

This Order shall remain in effect until fifteen (15) days after its effective date, unless earlier rescinded or superseded.

IV. EFFECTIVE DATE

This Order shall become effective immediately.



MURIEL BOWSER
MAYOR

ATTEST: 

KIMBERLY A. BASSETT
SECRETARY OF STATE OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA