Managing the unexpected

On Friday, August 13, EPWater crews were called out for a wastewater pipeline break in the area of Sunland Park and Doniphan Park Circle. The broken line is no ordinary line. It is one of a pair of large 36-inch pipes known as the Frontera Force Main that collects all the West El Paso wastewater – the used water from showers, sinks, washing machines and toilets. The Frontera Force main system delivers flows of up to 12 million gallons per day to the Hickerson Water Reclamation Facility, which then treats the water for reuse and for release to the Rio Grande.

In recent years, the Frontera Force Main has experienced an increasing number of breaks, causing the utility to perform a condition assessment in 2019. The results showed significant deterioration and corrosion, prompting an emergency pipeline replacement project that we started in March 2020. The two-year construction project is currently 60% complete and is ahead of schedule.

Crews responding to that mid-August call of a main break followed normal protocol and redirected wastewater flows from the broken pipeline to the secondary line. Dual pipelines help create redundancy, contributing to reliability.

From one break to a crisis

The real scary Friday the 13th crisis began when the second pipe also experienced a break in what turned out to be multiple locations about a football field away in distance from the first one. Repairs to the two Frontera pipelines quickly became a complicated and challenging operation due to the size of the system, the terrain and other challenging conditions. Over the next 24-48 hours, while work was underway, the system backed up and wastewater accumulated at a low point in an Upper Valley neighborhood, causing some wastewater to emerge and spill out from manholes. A few homes even had wastewater start to come up through bathtubs. It was ugly and a terrible nuisance for those who endured this mess.

During the peak of the crisis, EPWater sent out a notice calling on Westside customers to reduce water use. The goal was to allow the flow from the second line to work in a trickle. This allowed other flows to direct wastewater to a stormwater pond while other flows were directed to stormwater drains along Doniphan Park Circle. Businesses around Doniphan Park Circle also experienced the brunt of the crisis with construction disruptions, customer access issues, and the stench of wastewater.

Reaching out, cleaning up

We understand the inconvenience and mess this caused to both the affected neighborhood and businesses, and we apologize.

Within hours of learning of the wastewater overflows in the Upper valley neighborhood, we had staff and cleaning crews onsite working with affected neighbors. We later provided disinfection services for yards and homes.

Our staff visited affected Doniphan Park businesses, offering our apology, a letter of explanation and car wash passes. Private parking and driving areas were disinfected. Surrounding streets will also be cleaned and disinfected in the coming days and damaged landscaping restored in the coming weeks.

Throughout this whole experience we have been working with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, our regulatory agency. We are meeting the necessary remediation requirements for a wastewater overflow of this kind.

Replacement project accelerated

Work continues to repair the second line breaks, but I'm hopeful that the worst of the Frontera Force Main crisis is behind us.

While our emergency pipeline replacement project is running ahead of the planned March 2022 completion, I made the decision to direct the construction contractor to add more crews, work more shifts, and accelerate the work and get it done as quickly as possible. My hope is to have this replacement line completed by the holiday season.