

Haitians struggle for clean water weeks after hurricane

October 28 2016, by David Mcfadden



In this Oct. 25, 2016 photo, children collect drinking water from a station set up by Swiss Humanitarian Aid, in Aux Coteaux, a district of Les Cayes, Haiti. Wells and piped networks that people depend on for clean water across the country's southern peninsula were contaminated or damaged by a combination of ocean storm surge and sewage from the overflowing latrines that are commonly used in rural Haiti. (AP Photo/Dieu Nalio Chery)

It's been nearly a month since Hurricane Matthew tore through southern

Haiti and people like Kettley Rosier and many of her neighbors still have to spend their meager savings for water to drink.

Wells and piped networks that people depend on for clean [water](#) across the country's southern peninsula were contaminated or damaged by a combination of ocean storm surge and sewage from the overflowing latrines that are commonly used in rural Haiti. Tainted well water and rivers throughout the region also carry cholera bacteria, which epidemiologists suspect has sickened thousands of people since the Category 4 hurricane.

That means there is just not enough clean water to drink, let alone bathe, in places like the town of Coteaux, adding to the misery in an area where many people lost their homes, as well as the crops and livestock they need to survive.

"We're tired of this," Rosier said on a recent morning, scratching at skin irritated after bathing in suspect well water. For drinking water, she has to buy small bags from street vendors. "God only knows when the good water will come back."

An army of international relief teams have put enormous work into cleaning contaminated wells, distributing millions of water-purifying tablets and installing water treatment stations in areas that bore the worst of the hurricane. But it's not yet enough.



In this Oct. 25, 2016 photo, Jimmy Jeudy bathes with water from a well that was contaminated by sea water and trash during Hurricane Matthew, in Aux Coteaux, a district of Les Cayes, Haiti. The well water and rivers throughout the region also carry cholera bacteria, which epidemiologists suspect has sickened thousands of people since the storm. (AP Photo/Dieu Nalio Chery)

Roughly 90 percent of the piped water supply systems in southwest Haiti were damaged by the storm that struck Oct. 4, according to Haiti's National Water and Sanitation Directorate. Communal and private wells were contaminated across three provinces.

The extensive contamination of wells and the large amount of rain dumped by Hurricane Matthew created ideal conditions for spreading waterborne diseases including cholera, which causes rapid dehydration and can kill a human within hours if not treated. Authorities and aid groups say they have also detected fecal matter and E. coli bacteria in drinking supplies.

"A lot of sources are contaminated at the moment," said Leo Tremblay, a Canadian water and sanitation coordinator with Doctors Without Borders, which is overseeing a cholera treatment center in the village of Port-a-Piment and has sent staff by donkey to provide aid to remote mountain villages.

In the devastated city of Jeremie, two water purification stations operated by French government emergency workers have so far transformed river water into 450,000 liters of potable water. But international specialists say many communities right along shorelines still aren't getting adequate supplies.



In this Oct. 25, 2016 photo, 5-year-old Melifor Jean Pierre looks at the camera in Aux Coteaux, a district of Les Cayes, Haiti. Melifor's wound comes from crossing a river when he ran with his father and brother after their home was destroyed by the rising waters of Hurricane Matthew. (AP Photo/Dieu Nalio Chery)

Complicating matters, some storm victims are taking chances with their health.

In parts of the city of Les Cayes, people could be seen drinking straight from a contaminated well, bypassing treated supplies set up by a South Carolina-based organization known as Water Mission.

"Our bodies are used to dirty water. Maybe if we go to that new water place we'll fall sick," said Ephraim Bernard, a jobless 24-year-old standing by the contaminated well, located by a trash pit where three people were openly defecating on a recent morning.

Cholera was likely introduced to Haiti in 2010 by U.N. peacekeepers from Nepal and it has killed about 10,000 people and sickened more than 800,000. Haitians are generally aware of the risk and families often go to great lengths to ensure they stay healthy.



In this Oct. 24, 2016 photo, a firefighter team from Spain's Bomberos Unidos NGO test the quality in a potable water storage facility they installed in Port-Salut, a district of Les Cayes, Haiti. An army of international relief teams have put enormous work into cleaning contaminated wells, distributing millions of water-purifying tablets and installing water treatment stations in areas that bore the worst of Hurricane Matthew. (AP Photo/Dieu Nalio Chery)

Yvette Dorival, a 22-year-old who lives in hills above the devastated beach town of Port Salut, is making two-hour treks three times a day to carry a jug filled at a water treatment site set up by Bomberos Unidos Sin Fronteras, a Spanish aid group. On the way, she passed Swiss Humanitarian Aid workers patching up a splintered water supply system.

"Why is it I only see the blan out here working hard to get water to us Haitians?" she asked, using the Creole word for foreigners.

There are some locals pushing to increase supplies, including Georges Edouard Elie, a businessman who owns a reverse osmosis plant in Les Cayes that produces Eau Kay water for a string of south coast settlements He is working with Arkansas-based nonprofit Heifer International to install a network of 1,500-gallon tanks that can be fed by water trucks.

He said he is motivated in part by anxiety that his business could be attacked if the situation doesn't improve. "In my 24 years that I've been living here, this is the first time that I feel insecure," he said.



In this Oct. 25, 2016 photo, residents fill containers with fresh water from a water storage center set up by Doctors Without Borders near homes destroyed by Hurricane Matthew, in Port-a-Piment, a district of Les Cayes, Haiti. Roughly 90 percent of the piped water supply systems in southwest Haiti were damaged by the storm that struck Oct. 4, according to Haiti's National Water and Sanitation Directorate. (AP Photo/Dieu Nalio Chery)

Authorities say the water situation isn't likely to be resolved soon. Jean-Martin Brault, a water and sanitation specialist with the World Bank, said it's likely there will be a need to distribute water-purifying tablets and safe drinking water for six months in hard-hit zones.

Public services in general were shabby before the storm. Portions of some coastal towns in the southwest have gained piped water networks in recent years, though there is no sewage treatment in the area. Only about a quarter of Haitians have access to flush toilets or latrines that hygienically separate waste from human contact, according to the World

Bank.

Now local authorities see a rare chance to improve the situation. Matthew's aftermath coincides with recently announced plans by the U.N. to invest more in [clean water](#) and sanitation systems as part of a new approach to dealing with cholera in Haiti.

"This is an opportunity for us to get our systems more up-to-date," said Oswald Hyppolite, a water official for Haiti's South province.

Sustained help couldn't reach Rosier's community soon enough. Vendors have raised the price of [drinking water](#) by 25 percent and her family was struggling to pay. "We need water to survive, just like anybody else," she said.



In this Oct. 25, 2016 photo, children play near a potable water storage facility center set up by Doctors Without Borders, in Port-a-Piment, a district of Les

Cayes, Haiti. Hurricane Matthew's aftermath coincides with recently announced plans by the U.N. to invest more in clean water and sanitation systems as part of a new approach to dealing with cholera in Haiti. (AP Photo/Dieu Nalio Chery)



In this Oct. 25, 2016 photo, residents collect water from a well in Les Cayes, Haiti. The extensive contamination of wells and the large amount of rain dumped by Hurricane Matthew created ideal conditions for spreading the waterborne cholera bacteria, which causes rapid dehydration and can kill a human within hours if not treated. (AP Photo/Dieu Nalio Chery)



In this Oct. 24, 2016 photo, a woman takes a sip of water in Torbeck, a district of Les Cayes, Haiti. It's been nearly a month since Hurricane Matthew tore through southern Haiti and people still have to spend their meager savings for water to drink. (AP Photo/Dieu Nalio Chery)



In this Oct. 25, 2016 photo, Makenley Alcide bathes with fresh well water in Les Cayes, Haiti. Public services in general were shabby before Hurricane Matthew. Portions of some coastal towns in the southwest have gained piped water networks in recent years, though there is no sewage treatment in the area. (AP Photo/Dieu Nalio Chery)



In this Oct. 25, 2016 photo, a girl drags a suitcase of containers full of fresh water in Aux Coteaux, a district of Les Cayes, Haiti. The girl found the suitcase in debris left behind by Hurricane Matthew. (AP Photo/Dieu Nalio Chery)



In this Oct. 25, 2016 photo, residents collect fresh water from a well after Hurricane Matthew affected water supplies in Les Cayes, Haiti. It's been nearly a month since Hurricane Matthew tore through southern Haiti and people still have to spend their meager savings for water to drink. (AP Photo/Dieu Nalio Chery)



In this Oct. 25, 2016 photo, Gelene Jeudy, 16, pumps water from a contaminated well in Aux Coteaux, a district of Les Cayes, Haiti. Wells and piped networks that people depend on for clean water across the country's southern peninsula were contaminated or damaged by a combination of ocean storm surge and sewage from the overflowing latrines that are commonly used in rural Haiti. (AP Photo/Dieu Nalio Chery)

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