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Santa Cruz announces emergency repairs to Newell Creek Pipeline

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SANTA CRUZ — Emergency repairs were underway Wednesday to the Newell Creek Pipeline, one of the main arteries supplying water from the Loch Lomond Reservoir to the Graham Hill Water Treatment Plant, after it was shut down Tuesday following damage from recent atmospheric river storms, according to a release from the city of Santa Cruz.

Loch Lomond is the primary water storage facility for the city's water department and its 98,000 customers. It sometimes relies on the reservoir during periods of heavy storms when the city's normal water supply from local rivers and streams becomes stirred up with too much dirt and sediment and is unusable.

"Most of Santa Cruz's water infrastructure dates back to the 1960s, before climate change was on our radar," said city of Santa Cruz Water Director Rosemary Menard in the release. "It wasn't designed for the kinds of challenges that climate change brings, such as extreme storms and multiple years of drought. Newell Creek Pipeline is particularly vulnerable to these kind of extreme weather events."

The vast majority of the Santa Cruz water supply comes from local sources, with 95% originating from local rivers and streams. The city processes 6-8 million gallons of water per day, manages 4,000 acres of watershed lands and oversees 300 miles of distribution lines.

The city is relying on water from storage tanks and an emergency interconnection with the Soquel Creek Water District to help fill

maintain its short-term water supply. Should repairs to the broken pipeline take longer than expected, there may be a call for customers to temporarily cut back on water use, according to the release.

Santa Cruz Water Department spokesperson Eileen Cross told the Sentinel that the city's water supply was "holding steady" as of midday Wednesday, but there was no update on when repairs were expected to be complete.

The pipeline, which is the only link between the reservoir and the water treatment plant, has suffered repeated storm damages, including an event in 2017 that did result in a period of water use cutbacks for city residents.

The break comes amid plans for a massive overhaul of the city's critical backbone water infrastructure, including an effort to replace the Newell Creek pipeline at an estimated cost of \$38 million. The project will move the 8-mile pipeline from inside Henry Cowell State Park to an alignment with Graham Hill Road.

The Loch Lomond reservoir also reached its capacity and spilled into the upper San Lorenzo River in January for the first time since 2019.