

# Rural America's drinking water crisis

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Credit: State of the Planet

One winter morning C.H. Underwood looked up and down the street in his small town of O'Brien, Texas and realized something was wrong. The trash hadn't been picked up that week, or the week before, "and there was Christmas wrappings flying all over town." Underwood, coach of the high school debate and football teams, and part time rancher, made a series of phone calls to the members of the city council. He discovered that the trash collection company hadn't been paid in weeks, and so had

stopped coming. Further investigation revealed a deeper breakdown. The city had been unable to pay its bills to the utility company that provided treated reservoir water for the drinking supply, and as a result was cut off from the service. Rather than disclose its dire financial straits, the city council had decided to switch to supplying residents solely with water pumped from the ground – water that contained illegally high concentrations of nitrates, a pollutant common in agricultural areas. Residents of O'Brien drank this contaminated water for months before Underwood made his discoveries. The school eventually switched to using bottled water. Many residents purchased individual water filtration systems for their homes.

O'Brien is just one of thousands of small communities in the United States that struggle to find the resources to ensure that the [water](#) coming out of the tap is safe to drink. The budget proposal by the Trump administration will only make matters worse.

There are 59,266 community water systems in the US and 67% of them serve populations of fewer than 500 people. Many of these small towns suffer from shrinking populations, dwindling incomes, and aging infrastructure. David Kuehler, who grew up near O'Brien, noted, "When I was a kid, in this area, a huge farmer was 1,500 acres—now a huge farmer is 25,000 acres. And they're farming it with the same number of people."

Underwood was born ten miles west of O'Brien and has "not left very often." Thirteen families used to farm a 2,400-acre ranch near where he grew up. Just one farmer works the land now, commuting from 30 miles away. An amateur historian, Underwood estimates there were 1,500 people in O'Brien in the early 1900s. There was a 40-room hotel, a bottling works, a bank. The sign into town now reads: "Population 106." In the 1930 census Haskell County had 16,669 residents. By 2010, it was down to 5,899.

In 2016, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) issued [water quality](#) violation notices to 37% of Texas's 3,780 small community water systems. 357 systems had violations serious enough that they were required to notify their customers as soon as possible. A recent USA Today article profiled Ranger, Texas, where the city's water system, built for a population more than ten times the current size, has received repeated lead and copper violation notices. The median household income in Ranger is half the national average. One resident reported that he spends \$70 a month on bottled water.

After discovering that O'Brien had stopped paying its bills to the North Central Texas Municipal Water Authority, the entity that treats reservoir water to be sent to several towns in the area, Underwood called his friend Jimmy Johnston. Johnston had been employed as a water operator in O'Brien several years before. Together they investigated the O'Brien pump house, where the clean lake water was supposed to be mixed with treated groundwater to bring the [drinking water](#) supply within legal contaminant limits. They discovered that the pump room had fallen into complete disrepair. Chlorine gas, used to kill bacteria in the water, had been allowed to leak everywhere in the facility, destroying pumps and gauges. In addition to the \$24,000 O'Brien owed to the Water Authority, and fines levied by the state for noncompliance, the city also required new water treatment equipment to ensure that the water sent to its homes and schools was free of harmful bacteria.

President Trump's budget, released in March, proposes a 21% funding cut to the United States Department of Agriculture. This cut includes eliminating the USDA Water and Wastewater loan and grant program, which currently receives \$498 million annually. This program helps small, mainly rural, communities across the United States fund their drinking water and sewer systems. The President's budget proposal suggests that this funding need can instead be met by "private sector financing," or other Federal programs for rural water infrastructure, like

the EPA's State Revolving Fund. While Trump's budget additionally proposes cutting the EPA's budget by 31%, the Revolving Fund would receive an additional \$4 million, a mere 2% increase. For all of the President's campaign talk about prioritization infrastructure spending, his budget allocates only \$20 million to the Water Infrastructure and Finance Innovation Act program, the same amount it received in fiscal year 2017.

To fix its broken pumps and chlorine treatment system, O'Brien received a \$170,000 grant from the Texas Drinking Water State Revolving Fund, a program that in turn receives 80% of its resources from the federal EPA. In 2013, the EPA issued a report finding that small systems – systems that supply 3,300 persons or fewer with drinking water – required \$64.5 billion in infrastructure financing in order to bring or maintain compliance with Safe Drinking Water Act standards. The Revolving Fund currently receives less than \$2 billion a year. As a result of underfunding, people across the United States can be left without potable tap water for years. A 2015 report found that out of the 193 small community water systems nationwide that the EPA considered in 2011 to be the most serious violators of health-related water quality standards, 146 (76%) had not returned to compliance by 2015. The state with the highest number of small communities failing to meet health-based standards? Texas.

Mark Pearson works for Communities Unlimited, one of six regional organizations collectively known as the Rural Community Assistance Partnership whose mission is to assist small communities with water and wastewater challenges. Pearson was instrumental in helping Underwood and Johnson apply for the government grants that saved O'Brien's water supply. He says that demand for programs like the Revolving Fund and the USDA water grants "consistently exceed the levels of funding available."

On April 5, a bipartisan coalition of 62 members of the House of Representatives sent a letter to the House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee protesting the proposed USDA budget cuts. The letter, signed by 49 Democrats and 13 Republicans, points out that under its current funding levels the Water Sewer and Loan Program faces a backlog of 805 community applications, seeking more than \$2 billion in grants and low interest loans. The letter, signed by only one of Texas's 36 representatives, Democrat Filemon Vela, argues that the proposed cuts "will cause irreparable and long lasting harm to these water systems and the Americans who rely on them."



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When Underwood and Johnson were initially overwhelmed by the task confronting them to bring their water system back into compliance, they

asked what would happen if they did nothing. The answer, according to the Texas state regulators, was that the water system would be sold to a private operator that would invest in maintenance work, and in return, collect a margin of profit with each water bill. Johnson balked at the rates that were quoted, explaining, "in a situation like this, in a community like this, with so many older people, single family incomes, that would have been horrible." Food and Water Watch has found that private for-profit utilities charged households 59 percent more on average than local governments for drinking water service. An official from TCEQ estimated that private water utilities have rates that are between 40 and 60 percent higher than similar government-run services. While privatization may solve some of the problems small communities face, like a deficit of skilled managers, rate hikes are inevitable, and many of the communities with the most systemic water quality challenges are also the poorest.

Nevertheless, Trump's America First Budget Blueprint to Make America Great Again suggests that the funding gap left by the cuts to the USDA can be made up via "private sector financing." The last time the EPA did a comprehensive community drinking water survey (2006), it found that publicly owned water utilities spent more money on infrastructure investments than privately owned ones. There have been many recent examples of water system privatizations that led to disasters: see Atlanta, or Pittsburgh, where lead levels increased drastically after Veolia, one of the world's largest companies that consults and manages municipal drinking water supply systems, allegedly cut costs on an additive that prevents lead pipes from corroding into the water supply – this was in addition to laying off 23 employees "including the safety and water quality managers," according to Wired. Kuehler reported that a neighboring town had contracted with a private operator and only several years into the contract, were looking to get out: "The problem . . . was just lack of employees. They needed five people and [the company] said 'well we can do it with three' and they got in a problem.... The company

assured them that everything would be done perfectly there would never be a problem again and that's just not the way it really worked." The town continues to face drinking water problems and will soon switch back to public management of its water supply.

While O'Brien was able to fix its broken infrastructure with the up-front capital supplied from the EPA grants, the operation and management challenges remained. Employing a full-time water operator was beyond the city's budget, and even if they had managed to find the funds, it wasn't obvious they could find someone to do the job. When Johnson was employed as an operator several years ago, he made \$550 a month. "When I took the job it wasn't for the money – it was cause nobody else would do it. It's not a job that you can make a living at, if you're working for one little city like this." Selling the water system to a private company to operate could have solved the capacity deficit, but at a cost that Underwood and Johnson, who both joined O'Brien's city council, felt was too high for O'Brien residents.

Underwood came up with a plan. Knox City, located three miles north of O'Brien, with 1200 residents, had a full time city manager and water operators on staff. Underwood appeared at Knox City's council meeting and described O'Brien's recent water challenges. He asked if there was any way they could come up with an agreement with Knox City to have its staff also take care of O'Brien's water. O'Brien and Knox City signed an "interlocal agreement" in which Knox City took care of O'Brien's billing, meter-reading, monitoring of the water supply, and managing of the sewer system. The Pacific Institute, a research organization devoted to water issues, advocates regionalization as a means of taking advantage of economies of scale without turning supplying drinking water into a for-profit endeavor. A Columbia Water Center whitepaper also calls for an integrated, national approach to regional and urban [water infrastructure](#) development.

Congress is presently working on the appropriations bill for fiscal year 2018. In a few weeks we will know if Congress goes along with the proposal to gut support for programs like the one that saved O'Brien's water supply from being sold to a for-profit corporation.

Provided by State of the Planet

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