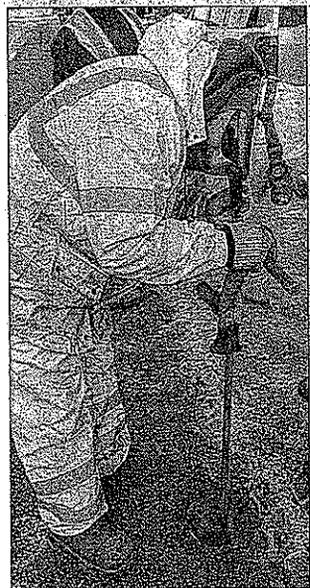


Weather



A Water Department worker listens to water flow to try to find the source of the leak on West Sixth Street.



Water is pumped from a sinkhole on West Sixth Street Wednesday near the intersection with Lakeside Avenue in Cleveland. Frigid temperatures and wind combine to make the job tough for Water Department employees.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN KUNTZ | NORTHEAST OHIO MEDIA GROUP

Water Department workers can't escape Mother Nature

SARA DORN
sdorn@cleveland.com

While plenty of Clevelanders complain about the winter as they scurry in and out of their cars, Water Department workers can't escape the frigid temperatures.

The crews are on duty 24/7 to fix water main breaks, even in the most extreme conditions; and the colder it is, the more breaks there are to fix. The de-

partment stations, 22 three-man crews throughout 5,200 miles of iron pipe in Cuyahoga County.

"Extreme cold is by far the worst. In the summer, the crews can stay hydrated to deal with the heat," Chief of Distribution Jim Thompson said. "They're out there every day. You get real caloused to it. It's a young man's game."

Sometimes the workers won't leave a site until the repair is complete, working up to 16 hours

with only a warm truck for relief. The cold water makes the work dangerous, exposing workers to frostbite and hypothermia.

The \$500-\$700 annual clothing allowance Cleveland gives workers helps. Layers are key, Thompson said, but not too many. Sweating means they end up cold and damp.

Carhartt suits, thermal-lined pants, boots and gloves insulated with rubber, wool socks and waterproof everything defend the

pipe repairmen against Mother Nature.

"The heat's in the tools. The harder you work, the warmer you'll be," Thompson said, quoting one of his former supervisors.

The crew members who spend their day in a watery hole are the warmest, because they're protected from the elements. Biting wind chills are one of the workers' worst enemies.

Toes and fingers chill more than any other body part, as the

body works to keep its core warm, sucking heat from the limbs. The workers warm their gloves on the truck heaters and compressors, and their bodies with hot soup and coffee.

It's been a busy time for the Water Department. From Jan. 8 through Saturday, workers saw a daily average of 11 water line ruptures, up from four Jan. 5 through Jan. 7. Still, workers say they don't dread the winter — overtime pay makes up for it.