



Committee: House Energy & Commerce Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigations
Event: [Corrosion, Collapse, and Clean-Up: Examining the Potomac Interceptor Collapse](#)
Date: May 20, 2026

Executive Summary:

On May 20, 2026, the House Energy & Commerce Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigations held a hearing to examine the January 2026 collapse of the Potomac Interceptor sewer line, particularly in relation to broader concerns affecting the nation's water and wastewater sector. Members focused on nationwide water and wastewater infrastructure funding challenges, significant permitting delays that hindered necessary upgrades and maintenance to the Potomac Interceptor, and emergency response efforts following the pipe's collapse.

Member Toplines:¹

[Subcommittee Chairman John Joyce \(R-PA-13\)](#): Joyce framed the Potomac Interceptor collapse as both an infrastructure failure and a broader warning sign about the condition of aging wastewater systems nationwide. He emphasized the public health, environmental, and economic consequences of the incident, arguing that infrastructure failures can threaten drinking water systems, damage ecosystems, and disrupt local communities and businesses. Joyce questioned whether warning signs were missed and whether regulatory or permitting processes delayed repairs, and positioned the hearing as an effort to identify systemic failures that could help prevent similar incidents moving forward.

Ranking Member Yvette Clarke (D-NY-09): Clarke argued that the Potomac Interceptor collapse reflects a broader national problem of aging and deteriorating water infrastructure rather than an isolated incident. She emphasized that water utilities are often aware of infrastructure vulnerabilities but struggle to complete necessary repairs before failures occur due to chronic underinvestment. She also criticized President Trump's Fiscal Year 2027 (FY27) budget request, arguing that it would weaken environmental protections and reduce funding for critical Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) water programs.

Full Committee Chairman Brett Guthrie (R-KY-02): Guthrie characterized the Potomac Interceptor collapse as a major failure. He argued that while emergency actions ultimately contained the incident, key questions still remain regarding whether warning signs were identified, how known vulnerabilities were addressed, and whether similar risks exist elsewhere in the system. He emphasized that failures of critical systems can erode public trust and underscored the importance of maintaining confidence in essential public infrastructure.

¹ The opening remarks from Subcommittee Ranking Member Clarke, Full Committee Chairman Guthrie, and Full Committee Ranking Member Pallone were unavailable at the time of this memo's distribution.

Full Committee Ranking Member Frank Pallone (D-NJ-06): Pallone stated that preventing future water system failures will require sustained federal attention and resources, rather than relying solely on emergency response efforts after incidents occur. He strongly criticized President Trump's proposed FY27 budget reductions to EPA and water infrastructure funding, particularly cuts to the Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds (SRFs). He argued that these reductions would exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and increase the likelihood of future infrastructure failures. He raised concerns about the Trump administration's priorities, including the White House Ballroom and the war in Iran, contending that greater investment in water infrastructure should be a national policy focus.

Witness Toplines:

Jessica Kramer, Assistant Administrator, Office of Water, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: Kramer argued that EPA's response to the Potomac Interceptor collapse was rapid, coordinated, and ultimately effective in addressing both the immediate and long-term impacts of the incident. She emphasized that EPA operations promoted public transparency and interagency coordination while ensuring that drinking water supplies remained unaffected.

Col. Francis B. Pera, Commander, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Baltimore District: Pera assured residents of Washington, DC that their drinking water supply is safe and stressed the importance of distinguishing between wastewater infrastructure and the separate systems responsible for drinking water treatment and delivery.

Edward Wenschhof, Acting Superintendent, Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior: Wenschhof explained that the National Park Service (NPS) had long coordinated with DC Water on major wastewater infrastructure projects. He detailed how NPS worked with federal and local partners during the response and emphasized ongoing cleanup and restoration efforts. He noted that while some remediation had been completed, additional work and long-term ecological restoration within the park system remain ongoing.

David Gadis, Chief Executive Officer and General Manager, DC Water: Gadis highlighted DC Water's rapid emergency response to the pipe's collapse, including coordination with federal and local partners and the deployment of a bypass system to prevent additional sewage discharges into the Potomac River. He underscored DC Water's commitment to accelerated inspections, remediation efforts, and system upgrades to prevent similar incidents in the future.

Tom Neltner, National Director, Unleaded Kids: Neltner stated that the Potomac Interceptor collapse is one example of a much broader national problem of aging water and wastewater infrastructure. He emphasized the scale and frequency of such events nationwide, arguing that while large incidents receive significant public attention, smaller overflows routinely impact local communities and pose serious public health risks. Neltner stressed that the most effective response is prevention through sustained investment in water infrastructure, particularly through the SRFs and the *Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (WIFIA)*.

Major Takeaways:

Infrastructure Management and Funding:

- Clarke urged greater focus on the issue of aging water and wastewater infrastructure nationwide and asked what lessons could be drawn from the Potomac Interceptor collapse to prevent similar accidents in the future.
 - Kramer explained that SRFs and WIFIA programs do not cover operations and maintenance for water infrastructure. She stressed the importance of continuous infrastructure management to evaluate existing and potential vulnerabilities.
 - Neltner emphasized the importance of SRFs and WIFIA in funding critical water and wastewater system upgrades and maintenance, particularly for small and rural communities.
- Pallone criticized President Trump's FY27 budget request for disregarding the importance of upgrading and maintaining critical water infrastructure and for nearly eliminating the SRFs.
 - Kramer noted that states are currently holding approximately \$14.8 billion in uncommitted SRFs and emphasized the importance of ensuring that those funds are properly distributed to water and wastewater systems.
- Rep. **Paul Tonko** (D-NY-20) applauded DC Water's proactive removal of outdated lead service lines and pointed out that the *Infrastructure Investment and Job Act* provided substantial funding for states to replace lead service lines.
 - Neltner stated that approximately four million lead service lines still need to be replaced and acknowledged the need for sustained federal funding to meet the targeted completion date of 2037.

Emergency Response:

- Palmer asked the witnesses whether they were aware of the severe degradation of the pipe prior to the collapse and condemned the lack of interagency communication regarding the pipe's deteriorated condition beforehand.
 - All witnesses stated that they had not personally been made aware that a breach was imminent.
- Joyce emphasized that the pipe's location complicated oversight and created challenges in determining responsibility among responding agencies.
- Rep. **Randy Weber** (R-TX-14) questioned Washington, DC's timeline for declaring a public emergency, noting that approximately 243 million gallons of raw sewage had spilled over the course of a month before the declaration was made.

President Trump's Response:

- Rep. **Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez** (D-NY-14) raised concerns about the Trump administration's focus on data center construction and called for congressional investigations into the impacts of data centers on drinking water safety and availability.
 - Kramer acknowledged that there are no mandates requiring data centers to conduct water quality testing prior to construction.
- Tonko and Rep. **Diana DeGette** (D-CO-01) criticized President Trump's use of Truth Social to blame his political opponents following the pipe's collapse, including the Governor of Maryland.

Permitting Delays:

- Guthrie, DeGette, and **Rep. Rick Allen** (R-GA-12) expressed frustration that relatively small environmental concerns forced the National Park Service (NPS) to restart its environmental assessments, ultimately delaying necessary pipe repairs from 2018 until the collapse occurred.
 - Wenschhof and Kramer declined to directly answer questions regarding the environmental assessments conducted in the years leading up to the collapse due to ongoing litigation.