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After years of low rates, customers can expect to pay more

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With all the questions surrounding the nation's water supplies and systems, one thing seems certain: Customers will pay more to keep their taps flowing.

Rates have been shooting up nationwide in drought-stricken states and in cities trying to upgrade their aging infrastructure. Experts say the trend is sure to accelerate as the cost of water, treatment and delivery comes into line with how essential water is to our daily lives.

The price for tap water still amounts to about a half-cent per gallon. Elected leaders have long fought to maintain cheap rates, but those prices don't cover the full expense of finding and treating new water sources or upgrading old pumps and pipes.

"The fact of the matter is, water rates are going to have to increase to reflect the cost of having this system that delivers it to every faucet in your house," said Greg DiLoreto, past president of the American Society of Civil Engineers.

Article continues below ↓

The Government Accountability Office said in a report last year that current rates were not enough to pay for the total cost of supplying water, let alone making needed upgrades.

A year ago, the average monthly household water bill was just over \$34 based on an average usage of 7,480 gallons, according to a survey conducted by the American Water Works Association. That's up more than 40 percent since 2008, or \$10 per month.

"Compare that to your cellphone bill or cable television bill or power bill or gas bill," DiLoreto said.

So far, rate increases don't seem to be generating widespread outrage — or even much notice — in the communities that have enacted them.

Bill Stowe, general manager of Des Moines Water Works in Iowa, said he was surprised by the lack of pushback when the utility raised its rates by 7 percent this year. What concerns him is the effect

on low-income residents.

"We've got some customers that when you talk about a 10 percent rate increase, that's maybe a decision about whether they can keep their car or whether they turn up their air conditioning the way it should be turned up," he said. "Those are tough decisions."

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