

Brutal Cold Snap Wreaks Havoc

By Mike Stanzel, Circuit Rider

Looking back at this past fall I think we all were surprised at the mild temperatures across the entire state clear up to the week before Christmas. In fact, I was in Chadron on December 20th and it was actually 63 degrees and it wasn't even noon yet. Then the very next day old Mother Nature came screaming in with a vengeance starting with freezing rain and then extreme cold. It hasn't let up for 2 weeks straight, shattering record low temps.

This is when the problems really start affecting our water systems. My phone has been ringing nonstop with questions and requests for assistance for everything from main breaks, to water towers freezing up, to water treatment plants and well houses freezing, as well.

Some of the biggest issues are water main breaks when it's this cold. My town had one and it took two days to fix mainly because they could not get the leak isolated due to either faulty, inoperable main valves to not being able to get on a valve because they were completely frozen full of water. Add in 20 below temperatures and this becomes a very dangerous situation.

Why are these main breaks happening with the cold snap? Well, I was listening to the news on the radio just the other day and they were interviewing a spokesperson from MUD who operates the city of Omaha's water system. She stated that during the New Year's weekend Omaha had 15 water main breaks, 5 on Sunday alone and an astonishing 558 for the year 2017. She went on to explain that the lack of moisture in the soil due to a very dry fall removed the "cushion" that can protect the water main when the frost sets in so rapidly from the extreme cold. It makes perfect sense to me.

In reality there is no way you can prevent a water main break but you may be able to better prepare yourself.

1. Make sure your valves are located, painted, accessible and free of ice, gravel, etc.
2. Make sure you have repair clamps of various sizes on hand.

3. Make sure your trash pump and suction hoses are in working order.
4. Be sure to have a propane torch to thaw frozen valves.
5. Also make sure you have good insulated boots or waders along with a good hat and gloves, because if you're going out in these dangerous conditions, you need to be protected.

Another problem I assisted with was a call for a frozen tower. Luckily it turned out the tower was safe but the quarter inch copper line supplying the transducer had frozen thus causing the wells not to turn on. There was electric heat tape and insulation, but the heat tape failed.

6. If your heat tape is more than 2 years old, replace it. It's not that expensive.
7. If bare pipes are exposed to an outside concrete wall, get some insulation between the two.
8. Another thing I strongly recommend is to be sure and check your wells and towers EVERY DAY. I can't stress this enough. Heaters can fail without any warning and with subzero temperatures major problems can occur within hours.

If anyone feels they would like some assistance with looking over their systems and helping get better prepared, please feel free to give me a call at 402-672-9084.