Supply Chain Concerns

- Critical chemicals
  - For many utilities, bleach (sodium hypochlorite) is the main critical resource, necessary for providing a safe supply of water. Not a lot can be stored at once, and utilities have had varying experiences with suppliers, who have expressed moderate to strong confidence in their ability to continue to provide it.
    - Generally, it seems the bleach is produced by local suppliers at their plant sites.
    - Raw materials are chlorine and hydroxide, or caustic soda.
    - For bleach produced through electrolysis, the process requires salt, or brine, and electricity.
    - Some of these shipments come in via rail.
  - Other essential chemicals and materials include: sodium hydroxide, aluminum sulfate, ferric chloride, liquid ozone (for producing ozone), various polymers (these can be stockpiled more so than other materials and are sourced from a variety of countries), and corrosion inhibitors (phosphoric acid).
  - Some utilities are increasing their on-site inventory of critical chemicals.
  - Some utilities have contracts with service providers, including for chemicals, that identify them as critical customers. In at least one case, the contract stipulates the provider will procure the materials by any means necessary if there are disruptions (with the utility continuing to pay the prices they had previously agreed to).
    - However, if service providers become non-responsive (such as in a situation in which they have high levels of absenteeism), the utility has alternate vendors it can reach out to. With a lot of chemicals being produced in Texas, ensuring that the transportation methods and corridors for getting them to other parts of the country deserves consideration. The transportation community should be made aware that there may be requests for expedited shipments of products. This would help prevent boil-water advisories and severe disruptions to societies.

- Local services – Power, fuel, logistics providers
  - Electric utilities have expressed strong confidence in the ability to continue to operate.
  - As a backup plan, utilities have generators. If used, however, they would require fuel resupply.
  - Utilities have had discussions with local logistics providers, such as the ones delivering chemicals and out of concerns they might have issues finding drivers. They are asking these suppliers about their back-up plans.

- Personal Protective Equipment
  - One utility proactively bought more equipment in advance, especially N95 masks (especially for situations when staff have to be out among the public taking samples). The masks would be used if staff had to quarantine in place.
  - For one utility, N95 masks were previously supplied through its resource officer. Now the utility is having to go through its emergency management office to request them. They’ve been told there is a shortage.
One utility’s chemists were commandeered to produce hand sanitizer.

Business Continuity Concerns

- Some utilities are considering sequestering their employees at the workplace if necessary.
  - At one utility, if a staff member becomes infected its plan is to quarantine non-infected staff at the utility, getting cots and acquiring food to enable them to remain on site. The utility is in a unique situation because it is of a different design from others in the area, meaning that staff from other nearby utilities likely couldn’t substitute for the primary staff. The utility is having a meeting later this week with colleagues in the region to discuss the potential issue of absenteeism.

- Utilities are implementing telework for eligible employees, as well as having employees stay at home and remain on call if needed to support the system (such as to operate remote sites).

- A utility raised the question of getting regulatory relief if there is a large degree of absenteeism among licensed operators.
  - For one utility, it’s gotten relief not for certified operators but for sampling sites. With some sites being off-limits (e.g., schools and nursing homes), the utility has been allowed to collect samples from elsewhere.
  - A utility rep made a comment that if his utility gets to the point where it is very limited on certified operators, it is looking at having non-certified operators come in to assist the certified operators.
  - In addition to certified operators, this question also applies to lab technicians.
    - One utility is identifying staff who have experience from previous jobs that could be helpful. They form a cadre of personnel who could be recalled to work at facilities.
      - Another utility said it has a cadre of retirees who are on standby.

- Some utilities are starting to implement business continuity plans, in terms of manning. In addition to encouraging telework, some utilities are telling some employees to stay at home until they are needed (reduced work schedules and work off-site plan). In the case of another utility, it has a full team staying at home for a full week. The teams who are working, meanwhile, have gone to 12-hour shifts. The utility plans to rotate the teams who are working and those that are staying at home.

- There is the question of when to implement business continuity plans, what are the triggers? For some, this is a question for the local government, and it might also need to involve a union.
  - One utility indicated it had been working with its union and hasn’t experienced any pushback.
  - One utility said its union agreement includes an emergency clause.

- A utility made a comment about most plants being unique, making it challenging for any utility to bring in outside operators and other staff to help run its operations.

- Question about what to do if an operator becomes infected – are other staff who were in contact with the operator also instructed to quarantine?
  - For one utility, it instructs employees who are symptomatic or who have been in contact with a person who has been confirmed to have been exposed to stay at home. In the case of someone coming to work who is later found to have COVID-19, it would quarantine people on site if they test positive or not. Another utility said it would do the same, keeping the plant running.
At another utility, it would identify the staff who were the least exposed to the infected person. They would be quarantined at the utility to continue to operate the plant, ideally keeping them isolated and well.

One utility said it is working with the health department on this type of guidance.

- Mutual Aid
  - Some utilities have the ability to connect to other utilities’ systems (in one case meeting upwards of 50 percent of normal demand, but necessitating water use restrictions). This would be a worst-case scenario.

Access to Facilities during Restrictions on Movement

- One utility indicated it had been in touch with local authorities to remind them of the first responder status of its personnel. At this point it hasn’t been an issue.
- For two utilities in North Carolina, they have certificates that allow personnel to transit through barriers, to travel to restricted areas. One of the utilities indicated it obtained this through the WARN program, although the actual certificate was issued through the state emergency management department. As a best practice, they added the state statute regarding the exemption to the back of the certificate.

Other Actions

- Some utilities are restricting access to their plants from outside visitors.
  - One utility indicated it is limiting normal in-person customer service and encouraging the use of online options through social media. In-person meetings are by appointment only.
  - One utility noted it is not taking any in-person customer service visits, even by appointment.
  - One utility submitted that it had locked down its plants for visitors.
  - One utility stated no consultants or contractors are allowed on site, unless they are deemed critical.
  - One utility asked if any of the other utilities are screening people coming to their sites.
    - Another utility responded that this might be a HIPAA violation, while another noted it is asking visitors to self-screen before they visit.
- One utility asked about delivery procedures.
  - One utility replied that it’s implemented the recommended separation of six feet between the delivery person and the utility employee. The utility acknowledged this wasn’t being implemented for the part of the interaction involving the signing of papers, adding it’s something the utility will likely reconsider.
- Numerous utilities indicated they’re not turning off services for delinquent payments for the next 30 days, being mindful that these could impact the most vulnerable populations. Electric and gas companies have been doing this as well.