

Michigan governor grudgingly admits Flint water danger

James Brewer
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After more than a year of stonewalling by officials in the state of Michigan, Governor Rick Snyder admitted publicly on Wednesday that there was a problem with the water in the city of Flint. Speaking to the press in Lansing, he responded to a question about the correctness of the decision to use Flint River water: “In terms of a mistake, we found there are probably things that weren’t as fully understood when that switch was made.”

He continued, “Again, we’re looking at making sure they’re within safe limits according to the federal government, and I would expect us to have more to talk about this subject before the end of the week, in terms of more tangible action items.”

Recent scientific studies have proven the toxicity of the water supply for tens of thousands of people, and the resulting public outrage has forced both state and local officials to change their tune.

Snyder pushed through the state law establishing the legal dictatorship of appointed emergency managers over elected municipal officials and then appointed Darnell Earley as the emergency manager in Flint. Earley (who has moved on to a similar position as emergency manager of the Detroit Public Schools) ended Flint’s decades-long contract with the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department in April 2014 and switched the city’s water source to the Flint River.

Less than a week ago, Hurley Children’s Hospital Pediatrician Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha confirmed at a press conference that lead levels in the bloodstreams of Flint children were significantly higher after the disconnect from the DWSD.

Four percent of children five years old and younger had lead levels of over 5 micrograms per deciliter—the level considered “elevated” by the Center for Disease Control—from 2.1 percent before switch to Flint River water. (New studies reveal that there is no safe level of lead in the bloodstream.) The Hurley results and recommendations corroborated the study done by a Virginia Tech university team led by noted water infrastructure engineer Dr. Marc Edwards.

The Hurley report recommended that residents stop using tap water for mixing infant formula, that pregnant mothers not use city water and that certified lead-clearing filters be distributed. Hanna-Attisha recommended connecting to water from Lake Huron as soon as possible. She also urged the city to issue a health advisory so federal funds can be made available to address the crisis.

Three days earlier, Hanna-Attisha and Mott Children’s Health Center CEO Dr. Lawrence Reynolds met with Flint Mayor Dayne Walling, current Emergency Manager Natasha Henderson and Public Works Director Howard Croft to present the findings before they were made public. They were told that reconnecting to Detroit water would bankrupt the city.

The day after the press conference, a Michigan Department of Health and Human Services spokesperson issued a response disputing the connection of lead levels to the change of water source, saying “our data is not in line” with that of Hanna-Attisha. In an email, Snyder called the Hurley data “spliced and diced.”

The *Detroit Free Press* then published its own analysis of state data, which corroborated Dr. Hanna-Attisha’s study. The article stated, “Despite the state’s efforts to discredit the Hurley data, the state’s own data show that there are a higher percentage of kids in Flint with elevated lead levels in their blood after the switch.”

The *Free Press* ran an editorial the same day, “Snyder must act on Flint lead crisis,” holding the governor responsible for the water crisis. It stated: “Snyder hasn’t hesitated to appoint or retain emergency managers in struggling cities across the state, a stance the *Free Press* Editorial Board has largely supported, with one caveat: Emergency managers have to make things better.”

For some 17 months, Flint residents have confronted indifference and deception by city and state officials. Complaints that unsafe water was being piped into their homes were answered with the same refrain: the decision was irreversible due to insurmountable financial obstacles.

Along with that, a torrent of lies and half-truths from

official sources insisted that the water supplied to residents from the city's new source, the Flint River, met state and federal safety regulations. To this day that is still the official line, despite the evidence from independent testing .

After the Hurley report, Flint schools have announced that they would no longer use tap water and have requested donations of bottled water for the students.

The exposure of backroom dealings has contributed to popular outrage. It was revealed on September 29 that Governor Snyder had arranged for delivery of 1,500 water filters to an organization called Concerned Pastors for Social Action, to distribute to Flint residents, with the stipulation that the source could not be revealed. The stock was distributed to residents, who stood in line, in just three hours.

After it was revealed that Snyder had worked with an unnamed private donor who paid the cost of the filters, Reverends Allen Overton and Alfred Harris said they had cooperated to ensure that the filters were delivered. Harris said, "If the water was OK, why would the governor work with someone to provide the filters? I think the state working with the private donor is an admission (that) the people needed some help."

"Our objective was to help the people. (Now) everybody is trying to cover their behinds," Harris added.

In the Virginia Tech team's initial report, Edwards raised the question: "How is it possible, that Flint 'passed' the official EPA Lead and Copper Rule sampling overseen by MDEQ [Michigan Department of Environmental Quality]?"

Considering the serious effects that lead poisoning has on children in particular, the question is completely reasonable. The state agency responsible to oversee the safety of drinking water provided to the public served as a rubber stamp for reckless decisions made for purely financial reasons.

On September 25, the MDEQ responded belatedly by posting an FAQ item on its website, "Water Lead Levels in the City of Flint." The document is a blatant attempt at deception. Its second point reads:

"Does the city meet federal drinking water standards for lead and copper?"

Yes, the city is meeting state and federal guidelines for lead and copper."

The document goes on to assert: "But the State and federal guidelines for lead and copper acknowledge an important reality: Any home that has a lead service connection or lead plumbing will impart some varying amount of lead into the home's water." The implication is that this is not MDEQ's problem.

But as Edward's research pointed out, the known corrosive chemistry of the Flint River water is what is responsible for the leaching of lead from plumbing into

residents' water. The water delivered to the home may be acceptable, but once it passes through the pipes inside the home, the inevitable chemical reaction makes it toxic.

Flint officials did nothing to address this issue when they made the switch from DWSD water, which is treated for corrosivity. The only reference to this by the MDEQ is an assertion that when the city joins the Karegnondi Water Authority next year (official estimates for completion of the pipeline is late 2016) corrosion control treatment will be in place.

A Flint Water Study commentary dated September 30, titled "MDEQ Mistakes and Deception Created the Flint Water Crisis," cites a letter from MDEQ communications Director Brad Wurfel to the *Flint Journal* smearing the work of the Virginia Tech team. The letter reads, in part:

"...this group specializes in looking for high lead problems. They pull that rabbit out of that hat everywhere they go. Nobody should be surprised when the rabbit comes out of the hat, even if they can't figure out how it is done ... while the state appreciates academic participation in this discussion, offering broad, dire public health advice based on some quick testing could be seen as fanning political flames irresponsibly. Residents of Flint concerned about the health of their community don't need more of that."

The Flint Water Study commentary goes on to establish a timeline of the deception by the MDEQ, using documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. It draws the conclusion that the MDEQ, the City of Flint and the US Environmental Protection Agency "have proved themselves unworthy of the public trust. Flint residents have been left to fend for themselves, when it comes to dealing with the dangers of high lead in their water."



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