

Michigan political crisis over lead poisoning in Flint

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The widespread lead poisoning of residents of Flint, Michigan, through the city's drinking water was a direct result of switching their water source to the Flint River. The *Detroit Free Press* has obtained documents through a Freedom of Information Act request that the city of Flint commissioned a report in 2011—three years before the switch was made—to analyze the viability of using the Flint River as a water source.

In 2013, the report was emailed to a Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) water official by a Flint employee. The study examined the possibility of the use of the Flint River as a long-term source for the city's drinking water. The specific chemicals that would be needed to treat the water in order to protect against corrosion of lead pipes were listed in the report as a treatment requirement in the event that Flint River water was piped into homes.

Thus, the year before the decision was made to switch to the Flint River, water quality authorities at both the local and state levels were aware of the hazard of lead in the water from supplying drinking water from the river, as well as the standard treatments employed to ameliorate the risk to public health and safety. Yet they proceeded with the switch without taking any of the well-established precautionary measures.

To say that the actions of authorities concerning Flint's water system were negligent or reckless doesn't adequately characterize them. These are criminal acts.

The dangers of lead poisoning, particularly among children, are widely known. The web site of the World Health Organization says, "Young children are particularly vulnerable to the toxic effects of lead and can suffer profound and permanent adverse health effects, particularly affecting the development of the brain and nervous system."

Although the toxicity of lead has been known for many centuries, it wasn't until 1986, in an amendment to the Safe Drinking Water Act, that the federal government finally prohibited the use of lead water pipes. Therefore, in Flint, as in cities across the country with aging infrastructure, lead pipes are ubiquitous. Water specialists are well aware of this.

This is why water systems—such as the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD), which supplied Flint's water until the switch—treat water for corrosion control. Chemicals are added to the water, usually phosphates, which create a coating inside pipes in order to inhibit the lead from leaching into the water as it flows through. In addition, river water is known to have an inherently higher corrosive effect than that from larger bodies of water, such as was supplied by the DWSD. Specifically, the Flint River, the subject of the 2011 study, is a relatively small river flowing through a densely populated, once heavily industrialized urban area.

Yet, on April 25, 2014, the switch was made—to great fanfare in the media that this would save the city millions.

From that date until last month, when the city switched back to DWSD water, public protest over Flint water grew as the water quality deteriorated, provoking a nonstop series of lies by authorities. City and state officials alike presented a united front, declaring that the water was perfectly safe to drink.

The MDEQ claimed that testing of the water proved that it met "all state and federal standards" for safe drinking water. In June, the MDEQ conducted tests for lead in drinking water in the homes of Flint residents and announced that its results showed that Flint water passed Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) safe water standards.

The barrage of misinformation was shattered by two independent studies. A Virginia Tech University team headed by Dr. Marc Edwards released the results of its in-depth sampling of water from the homes of 277 Flint residents, which showed "a very serious lead in water problem," with a "90th percentile lead value" of 25 parts per billion (ppb)—well over the US EPA's 15 ppb "action threshold." Edwards warned Flint residents at a press conference and a town hall meeting in mid-September not to drink the tap water without certified filtration.

MDEQ Communications Director Brad Wurfel responded publicly: "...this group specializes in looking for high lead problems. They pull that rabbit out of that hat everywhere they go.... [O]ffering 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."

Then, on September 24, a pediatrician at Hurley Medical Center in Flint, Mona Hanna-Attisha, held a press conference to announce the results of her study of lead in the bloodstreams of children, comparing results before and after the switch to Flint River water. Four percent of children five years old and younger had lead levels of over 5 micrograms per deciliter—the level considered “elevated” by the Centers for Disease Control—up from 2.1 percent before the switch to Flint River water.

A Michigan Department of Health and Human Services spokesperson, Angela Minicuci, immediately responded, saying “our data is not in line” with that of Hanna-Attisha, adding that the state’s data was more comprehensive and “much more accurate.” In an e-mail, Michigan governor Rick Snyder called the Hurley data “spliced and diced.”

Finally, on September 30, Governor Snyder acknowledged publicly that Flint’s water had a problem. The very next day, a public health emergency was declared by the city of Flint. The state provided \$9.3 million to help finance reconnecting to DWSD water, which began flowing October 16.

Now, the lies have metamorphosed into cover-up and obfuscation.

In response to demands by the Michigan Democratic Party that Snyder fire Darnell Earley from his current position as Detroit Public Schools emergency manager for his responsibility in switching to Flint River water when he was that city’s emergency manager, Earley claimed that the decision was not his. Even though the public record belies this claim, Sara Wurfel, a spokeswoman for Governor Snyder, responded in a statement that the decision to use the Flint River “was pushed or supported by the city and community” and that Flint had “no choice” after its contract with the DWSD expired.

E-mails that have been made public show that while the Flint City Council approved changing its source to the Karegnondi Pipeline project, which is supposedly to be completed in 2016, it never authorized the switch to the Flint River. The assertions by both Earley and the governor’s office are lies. The initial decision to switch was made by the previous emergency manager, Ed Kurtz, but Earley oversaw it.

It has been revealed that the MDEQ’s June testing for lead, which was the basis for the claim that lead in water levels were below the EPA “action level,” was falsified. The two samples that showed the highest lead levels were removed from the calculation.

Despite the reprehensible role played throughout by the

state agency responsible for oversight of water quality, Snyder is so far defending MDEQ director Dan Wyant. The only measure taken thus far by the state is the reassignment of MDEQ’s Office of Drinking Water and Municipal Assistance Division chief Liane Shekter Smith after she publicly admitted, “There was no corrosion control plan put forward at the time of the switch.”

Since the reconnect with DWSD water, calls for investigations have been made from various quarters:

- US Rep. Dan Kildee and Michigan State Minority Leader Jim Annanich have both made public calls for the EPA to conduct an investigation into the Flint events, “to ensure this never happens again.”

- US EPA head Gina McCarthy announced that a review will be conducted.

- Annanich has also called for a state legislative committee to be set up to hold hearings.

- Snyder appointed a four-man “task force” to review the switch and produce an “after-action” report. The body will not have subpoena power, and the governor is not compelled by law to make any of its findings public.

These “investigations” amount to damage control. The public outcry over the toxic water has created a political crisis at every level of government. The motivation for endangering the health of almost 100,000 Flint residents was purely and simply to cut costs.

In the aftermath of the return to DWSD water, Dayne Walling, Flint’s Democratic mayor since 2009, was ousted in the city’s elections by Karen Weaver, whose program centered on opposition to Walling’s stonewalling on the water crisis.

In the midst of this political firestorm, the city announced on November 5 that it would send 1,800 water shutoff notices to residents. The action resumes a practice that was prohibited by a court order last August by a Genesee County circuit court judge. The injunction also ordered the city to rescind a 35 percent increase in water rates that it ruled was in violation of a city ordinance.



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