

New revelations expose federal cover-up in Flint, Michigan water crisis

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The highest level US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) official in the Midwest was aware as early as April 2015 that the water being piped into the homes of Flint, Michigan residents was not being treated for corrosion control, yet said nothing. This despite the fact that it is common knowledge among water professionals that the lack of such treatment, especially in highly corrosive water as that found in the Flint River, will cause lead to leach into tap water from pipes and fixtures.

The revelation of the federal government's role in the cover-up of lead poisoning of Flint residents comes as reports show a dramatic increase in cases of Legionnaires disease and related deaths in Flint, likely a result of the Flint River water. Protests by Flint residents are continuing, with a demonstration Thursday in the state capitol of Lansing demanding the resignation of Michigan Governor Rick Snyder for his role in concealing the dangers confronting Flint residents.

EPA Region 5 Administrator Susan Hedman made a decision not to use the authority of the agency to compel local water officials to apply a \$100 a month phosphate treatment to protect the Flint water infrastructure from corrosion or even to alert the public of the health danger in drinking the water, she told the *Detroit News* this week.

According to the report, the EPA “battled” over corrosion control with the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) behind the scenes starting in February.

It is worth looking back to a September 2015 posting on the Flint Water Study website of Professor Marc Edwards to understand the context of this “battle.”

It was in February that an EPA expert from Region 5, Miquel Del Toral recognized lead problems with Flint water. On February 26, a water sample from the home of one particular resident, Lee Ann Walters, was measured with extremely high lead content—over 100 parts per billion (ppb), while the EPA “action level” is 15 ppb.

Del Toral asked MDEQ the next day if Flint was using phosphates for corrosion control. MDEQ official Stephen Busch blatantly lied: “The City of Flint...Has an Optimized

Corrosion Control Program [and] conducts quarterly Water Quality Parameter monitoring at 25 sites and has not had any unusual results.”

Just over two weeks later, Walters' home was retested with even higher lead levels—397 ppb. When questioned, the MDEQ said they had investigated, finding that the source of the elevated lead was due to “lead sources in her plumbing.”

Walters knew this to be untrue, since all the plumbing in the house had been replaced with plastic pipes.

Walters' young son was having health problems. On March 27, he was diagnosed with lead poisoning.

To check on the MDEQ claim the previous month that an “Optimized Corrosion Control Program” was in place, Walters called the City of Flint. She was told that there was, in fact, no program at all for corrosion control! She notified Del Toral, who in turn asked MDEQ again, in an email, what corrosion control program Flint was using. This time the response was the truth: Flint was using no corrosion control.

In an internal EPA Region 5 memo, Del Toral stated, “Flint has not been operating any corrosion control treatment, which is very concerning given the likelihood of LSLs [lead service lines] in the City.”

He became concerned that there would likely be widespread elevated levels of lead in Flint water without the treatment. He subsequently discovered that the sampling method being utilized by the MDEQ and Flint water authorities was obscuring the actual levels of lead in tap water, writing in a June 24 internal memo: “The practice of pre-flushing before collecting compliance samples has been shown to result in the minimization of lead capture and significant underestimation of lead levels in drinking water.”

Del Toral added that this method of sampling was a “serious concern” because it “could provide a false sense of security to the residents of Flint regarding lead levels in the water.”

In her interview with the *Detroit News*, EPA Region 5 Administrator Hedman defended her silence, saying that the role of the EPA was to provide treatment standards and

monitoring techniques and that under the law, the state is the primary regulator of water operations.

Returning to the Flint Water Study chronology, the same day as Del Toral notified the EPA of the seriousness of the Flint water situation, he dropped off sampling bottles at Walters' home and told her to contact noted water expert Marc Edwards at Virginia Tech University to help her to perform a proper sampling. After gathering tap water samples according to Edwards' direction and returning them to VT, Edwards was stunned. The average lead level was 2,429 ppb, with a high sample of 13,200 ppb.

When Del Toral was informed of the results, he drove back to Flint from his home in Chicago just in time to see the city replacing the service line to Walters' home, which he personally confirmed had been pure lead.

From February to June both the City of Flint and the MDEQ conducted the testing required by the federal Lead and Copper Rule (LCR) in a way that purposely obscured the high lead levels in the city. In the last five days before the June 30 deadline for collecting the required 100 samples, Adam Rosenthal of the MDEQ emailed Mike Glasgow at the City of Flint: "We hope you have 61 more lead/copper samples collected and sent to the lab by 6/30/15, and that they will be below the AL [action level] for lead. As of now with 39 results, Flint's 90th percentile is over the AL for lead."

This is what happened according to Edwards: "In the next five days the City collected 30 samples, all of which were below the action level, and did not reach the 100 sample target. If all 71 collected samples were counted, the City would have exceeded the 15 ppb action level. *Federal law would then require that Flint residents be provided information about how to protect themselves and their children from lead in water.*"

Del Toral's concern with the sampling methods being used was a major problem for the MDEQ's operation, which can only be described as criminal. On August 4, Walters and another Flint resident, Melissa Mays, described a meeting they had with MDEQ officials Liane Shekter-Smith (Chief of the Office of Drinking Water and Municipal Assistance), Stephen Busch and Brad Wurfel. Like a mafioso, Shekter-Smith bragged that "Mr. Del Toral has been handled," and that Flint residents would not be hearing from him again, adding that Del Toral's interim memo on corrosion control "would never be finalized."

Later, an NPR report stated, "MDEQ spokesman Brad Wurfel says the report was the work of a 'rogue employee,' and promised the final report—not yet released—would tell a much different story."

Thus, an experienced and diligent EPA expert was vilified and effectively silenced.

In light of these facts, Hedman's defense of her role as head of the EPA is vacuous. In an attempt to deflect responsibility she said, "It is important to understand the clear roles here. Communication about lead in drinking water and the health impacts associated with that, that's the role of DHHS (Department of Health and Human Services), the county health department and the drinking water utility."

The head of the MDHHS, Chief Medical Executive Eden Wells, in another recent revelation, admitted to NBC News on Wednesday that the state's response to a July email from a state health worker warning of an increase in the blood lead levels of Flint children, was "a missed opportunity" to act on the poisoning of the water. The writer of the email, Cristin Larder, an epidemiologist, noticed the spike in blood levels in July, August and September of 2014, shortly after the April 2014 switch to Flint River water.

Since lead exposure is cumulative, continued exposure increases the deleterious effects on the body. So the longer the failure to act on such warnings, the greater the extent of the poisoning. To call inaction a "missed opportunity" would be laughable if it weren't so serious. Flint residents had been actively warning officials for almost 21 months of the poor quality of Flint's water. Now it is being revealed publicly that the callous response they received was an expression of a conspiracy at the highest levels.

In a recent interview, Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, the pediatrician who uncovered the spike in levels of lead in Flint children's blood last September, said, "This experience has really shattered my trust in government. It's not that I was naive to start with, but you'd expect that utilities, states, federal agencies would take their jobs seriously and try to protect people rather than deliberately mislead, lie and make up excuses not to protect public health."



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