

Report: Flint lead filters provide inadequate protection for residents

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2 February 2016

Federal and state officials are warning Flint residents that the lead filters they are using may be inadequate to protect them from the effects of elevated levels of lead in the city's drinking water.

The warning came Friday after random samples collected from 26 residences since the final week of December came back with lead levels higher than the filters are designed to handle. The highest reading among the 26 homes was 4,000 parts per billion (ppb). The filters are not rated to handle lead levels above 150 ppb. The tests covered 3,900 homes.

After more than two years of lies and cover-up by federal, state and local officials, Flint residents are in a restive mood. Megan Kreger, a member of the local activist group Water You Fighting For, told the WSWS, "I didn't believe it [about the lead filters] from the beginning. It has only finally hit the press.

"There has been fraud and negligence at all levels. It is a humanitarian disaster. We should not be living without clean water when we are only one hour away from one of the largest bodies of fresh water in the world."

She rejected claims that Flint water is now safe for bathing. "My boyfriend took a shower before the Rachel Maddow town hall [over the weekend] and got the worst rash he has ever gotten. It almost looked like chicken pox."

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recommends action be taken when lead levels exceed 15 ppb, though there is no safe level of lead exposure. Mark Durno of the EPA said the affected residents have now been contacted. The state had previously insisted that drinking filtered water was safe.

In the wake of the findings, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder urged all Flint residents to have their water tested as soon as possible. Dr. Eden Well, chief medical

executive of the state's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), advised children under six and pregnant women to drink only bottled water.

In an effort at damage control, Snyder sent a letter to state employees Friday, stating "what happened in Flint can never be allowed to happen again anywhere in our state." The governor has tried to deflect all blame for the crisis to the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and lower-ranking officials.

The DEQ said Monday that it has undertaken a five-part strategy to determine whether Flint water is safe to drink. The DEQ said it is working on a plan to make sure that residents with high lead-blood levels get their water tested.

Another issue of concern to Flint residents is that filters only have a limited life span, after which they are no longer effective. This is particularly true if the faucet where the filter is installed is the only source of water in the home.

Further, many Flint homes have older faucets that will not accommodate the water filters provided by the state. Over the weekend some 300 plumber volunteers installed new faucets free of charge in some 1,100 Flint homes, still a fraction of the city's residences.

Federal officials said they were not sure why recent samples came back showing elevated levels of lead. Despite the findings, the EPA did not call on residents to stop using the lead filters. More testing is being planned.

The report on lead filters comes as state officials on Friday informed residents at more than 250 addresses living in areas of Genesee County outside of Flint that their water may also be tainted.

Dana, an auto parts worker who lives just outside of Flint, said she had just learned that her water may be dangerous to drink. "This is crazy. I live in the county

and they just posted a whole bunch of addresses that might be affected. It appears it is impacting more than just the city of Flint. They had us misled. They told us it was fine. I was making coffee with the tap water every morning.

“It is an outrage. It is getting worse and worse. Everyone in the government is to blame. We as citizens do not know what is going on.”

Soon after the switch by the city of Flint in 2014 from its traditional water source, the Detroit water system, to the polluted Flint River, residents began to complain of foul-tasting, discolored water coming out of their taps. Nevertheless, citizens were repeatedly told the water was safe.

It later emerged that the highly corrosive water from the Flint River was leaching lead from the city’s antiquated piping, poisoning the city’s 100,000 residents. Even after the switch back to the Detroit water system in October, lead levels remain dangerously high due to the damage already done to the city’s water pipes.

Ten deaths from the deadly Legionnaires’ virus have also been traced to Flint water.

In another development, the US Department of Agriculture rejected a request by Snyder to extend the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program to Flint residents up to the age of 10. A department spokesperson said federal law limited the program to children under age five. The program provides grants to states for supplemental foods, health referrals and nutrition information to pregnant and postpartum women with infant children.

Health professionals say proper nutrition is important in mitigating the long-term effects of lead poisoning in children. Children are especially vulnerable to lead, since their developing brains and nervous systems are more sensitive to toxins. The city has a child poverty rate of nearly 67 percent, 10 percentage points higher than Detroit.

According to the Michigan DHHS, 130,095 people in Genesee County, where Flint is located, are using food stamp assistance now, compared with 87,847 in 2005.

The report on continued high levels of lead in Flint’s water supply comes as Michigan’s Attorney General Bill Schuette says the state may not provide legal counsel for seven DEQ employees who are the subject of a class action lawsuit by Flint residents. Schuette has

asked a federal judge to decide the matter of representation.

The lawsuit alleges the state endangered Flint residents by switching the city’s water source to the Flint River. In addition to the DEQ employees, the lawsuit also names Snyder, the state of Michigan, the city of Flint, two former emergency managers, the former Flint mayor and three city employees.

It has been filed on behalf of 10 plaintiffs, but seeks class action status for all Flint residents. It seeks compensatory and punitive damages, the creation of a medical monitoring fund and the appointment of a monitor to oversee Flint water.

The suit does not name federal officials, however the Obama administration’s EPA is deeply implicated in the cover-up of the lead poisoning danger. As early as April 2015, the highest-level EPA official in Michigan was aware that Flint water was not being treated for corrosion control, but said nothing. This, despite the fact that water professionals understand that such treatment is necessary if highly corrosive water like that from the Flint River is being used for drinking because of the danger of lead leaching from old piping.

Snyder has claimed he did not become aware of problems with Flint’s drinking water until October 1, 2015.



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