

US Environmental Protection Agency administrator appears in Flint, Michigan to “rebuild trust” over water crisis

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3 February 2016

The head administrator of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Gina McCarthy, held a press conference in Flint, Michigan Tuesday to announce the agency’s plan to address the lead-in-water crisis in the city. The event was held just one day after the resignation of EPA Region 5 Administrator Susan Hedman, who oversaw the Midwestern region including Michigan.

McCarthy’s one-day visit to Flint was a politically orchestrated effort at damage control engineered from the highest levels of government. She said in her remarks, “We also know that the level of trust needs to be rebuilt here.”

The event took place under the shadow of a political crisis over the two-year failure of local, state and federal officials to protect the 100,000 residents of Flint from the poisoning of the water system. The location of the press conference was held at an unpublicized location, with an “RSVP only” requirement for media representatives to attend. The organizers were clearly concerned that Flint residents would hold a protest either inside or outside of the venue had it been public.

Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, the pediatrics professional whose study released in late September showed that Flint children’s blood lead levels had increased sharply since the city’s emergency manager switched the city’s water source to the polluted Flint River was invited to speak. She thanked the EPA for “finally looking at our water more closely” and doing the tests required to determine the quality of water in the city.

Hanna-Attisha added, “As you know, our water is still not safe. We still have a lot of lead leaching from our plumbing and there’s a need for ongoing testing. And I am reassured that we actually have the

experts—the world corrosion experts, the world lead-in-water experts—here on the ground doing the testing that needs to be done.”

McCarthy, appointed by President Barack Obama to the leading position in the EPA in 2009, opened her remarks by thanking Hanna-Attisha for not just being at the press conference, but for “your determination, your commitment and your courage.” She said that “without that, I’m not sure we would all be standing here today with the level of commitment, not just of the EPA, but certainly across the federal family.”

Also, today, it was announced that the FBI would be conducting a criminal investigation into the Flint catastrophe. For almost two years since the switch to Flint River water, residents’ protests over the water quality were answered with stonewalling and lies, the most egregious of them being that “the water is safe to drink.”

McCarthy addressed the television cameras with a dire message for the people of Flint: “Right now the bottled water is the safest choice. It is not safe to drink the water in Flint today, especially vulnerable populations. So, if you’re pregnant, you need to drink bottled water. If a child is under six years old, make sure that they drink bottled water.

“For everyone else, use filters. Filters that have been tested. Follow the instructions that come with those filters, so you know that they’re on properly and when you use it make sure that you check that filter and change it according to what the directions say.”

After making assurances that “the safety of Flint residents is everybody’s number one priority,” McCarthy declared, “we are here for the long haul.”

In her presentation, McCarthy sought to put the

blame for the Flint disaster solely on the state of Michigan and its Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ). Yet the resignation of the EPA Region 5 administrator Hedman was a result of her being discredited for suppressing information, brought to light by an EPA employee, Miguel del Toral, that water sampling was being done improperly under the direction of the DEQ and that, in fact, no corrosion control was being carried out at all in the Flint water system.

World Socialist Web Site reporter Lawrence Porter asked McCarthy during the question period: “You say that the state is responsible for this. Isn’t the EPA equally responsible for what’s happened over the past year? In April, Miguel del Toral, in fact, submitted a memo, which was quashed, and he was silenced. If, in fact, that material had been taken up, it would have shown that what was taking place was illegal under the Safe Water Act, but that wasn’t done. In fact, he was silenced. How do you explain that?”

McCarthy’s response was a direct lie. She said, “Well sir, I’ll let you talk to Miguel on your own because he’s been available, and, as I’ve said before, Miguel has never been silenced, and he won’t be. He’s one of our experts and he’s working with us and he is doing a great job and he has been for our agency. So you can speak to him about this.”

She went on to claim, “We are here today, because a state-appointed emergency manager made the decision that the City of Flint would stop purchasing treated water that had well served them for 50 years and instead purchased untreated water and not treat that water. That is the decision that was made. And by law, the state of Michigan had to approve that switch and they did not require corrosion control. All to save money.

“Did EPA do everything it could? I will find out. We have an investigation ongoing at my request. But I do know that EPA raised these issues time and again. I know that we were misled. I know that we were rebuffed. And I know that we were ignored.”

Such is the Obama administration’s official line.

The *Flint Water Study* website, operated by Dr. Marc Edwards, who led the independent testing of Flint water this summer, has a different take. Virginia Tech researcher Siddhartha Roy states in an article that del Toral was under virtual house arrest: “Del Toral,

gagged and effectively placed under house arrest by EPA Region 5 Administrator and political appointee Susan Hedman, was certainly guilty of doing his job. In early July, Del Toral released an interim memo to sources (Walters/Edwards) outside of the EPA that first sounded the alarm about MDEQ’s illegal decision to not use corrosion control for the Flint River water source. His memo also detailed the perils that illegal decision posed to the city of Flint and the health of its children. The lack of corrosion control has caused red water, taste and odor problems, pipe infrastructure damage, childhood lead poisoning and quite possibly an outbreak of Legionnaires disease.”

It was only through the independent testing done by the Virginia Tech team that the danger in the water being piped into the homes of Flint residents became known. Edwards made a public warning in early September that Flint citizens should not drink the water. His warnings were made while local and state authorities were covering up the water crisis that the EPA had known about for months! It was only after Republican governor Rick Snyder made the decision to make the funds available to return to Detroit water that the EPA publicly recognized Flint’s crisis.



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