

Michigan lead expert exposes misinformation and delays in Flint crisis

Tim Rivers
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Ed Wenz has been involved with lead since his son became poisoned eight years ago. In 2008, the state of Michigan approached him to begin teaching lead abatement contractors and lead risk assessors. It was two years before he agreed to accept the job and set up a company. Today, he writes specifications for remediation of environmental contamination of different kinds so that contractors can bid projects and their work can be inspected.

Although intimately familiar with the struggles of families hit by its effects, Wenz was shocked and deeply moved by the comments of victims last week at the Flint Institute of Arts. He expressed a growing sense of disbelief and deep frustration as reports of the responses by various agencies at different levels of government emerged. We arranged to speak with him after the event. This is his statement:

In my thinking, there were too many layers that missed this. We have to fix this problem, period.

The built-up layer of calcification was completely eroded. They can inject polymer coating so that lead could never leach in. My customer at DuPont does this and they are working with highly acidic water.

A lot of the waste lines have been deteriorated. Does anybody think about the waste distribution system?

The waste distribution system has cracks. The hubs are leaking. Everything that has gone down the drain is in one way or another going through that system. In other words, the lead contaminated water is leaking into the ground, contaminating the groundwater in the area and the underground aquifer.

In Washington, D.C., different neighborhoods were affected by different lead levels of contamination [referring to the 2001-2004 lead-in-water crisis]. The water wasn't moving as much in some places, and so a sediment would build up in the dead leg of the system.

That sediment had more concentrated contamination.

I believe the government messed up. Is this the new Chernobyl? Will everybody have to move?

I was working for the city of Pontiac when the emergency manager came in and cut that city government to shreds. They stole their pensions and got rid of the building department and the department of public works.

Today they are saying that the pipes can be relined with calcification and be safe. There is no way that those pipes will be safe. It would take 10 to 15 years before you could safely drink that water. They must be lined with an impervious polymer or ripped out and replaced.

When water leaves the treatment plant it is crystal-clear. Federal law requires that a polyphosphate additive be added at that point. But in Flint, they failed to put that in. That is a violation of federal law. In fact, they added extra chlorine because of pollutants in the river water. This combination of acidic water and extra chlorine stripped the calcified layer from the inside of the pipes exposing the water to lead contamination.

The acidic content or lower pH stripped the interior of the pipes as if it were sandblasting off the calcified buildup. You can't see lead in water. It is clear.

The state and the city were saying all along that before testing the water you have to first flush the pipe for five minutes. That instruction is a violation of federal law. On the contrary, the water must sit in the pipes for six hours. Usually, tests are taken at 6 a.m., before the water in the house has been used at all. The test draw should be a full liter, not the 125 mL, which is the size of a Dixie cup, which the state and the city were calling for.

Did they not know? Or were they deliberately falsifying the procedure? There are only two

possibilities here: (1) They were incompetent, or (2) It was rigged.

This is so much bigger than simply a matter that someone has bad water. When I heard that Andy Dillon was involved in the decision to switch the water source to the Flint River, I said “follow the money trail.” You have to connect all the puzzle pieces. Decisions that they were making under the emergency manager did not make any sense for the city financially.

For example, they got rid of the Department of Public Works and lost all the state and federal payments for the roads. It was costing them more money, but they did it anyway.

A 12-inch water main can have as much as an inch and a half of calcified buildup around the interior. That reduces it down to 9 inches in diameter. When that layer is stripped away, you have reduced the structural integrity of the pipe. Now, there is a hidden disaster waiting to happen. And nobody has saved any money to fix major water main breaks.

Great technology does exist. You can put a bladder of an elasto-polymer inside a sewer line or a water main and cover 200 to 400 feet at a time. It will harden into an impervious liner.

The problem with providing homeowners with filters is that you don’t know when it’s going to plug up. The lead and chemical makeup of the water might cause the filter to fill up in a week. Then it will let the lead and chemicals pass through.

I could organize 1,000 guys in a week and set them up with a program to systematically check the water and change the filters. You will never get the work done with one guy or the way they are approaching it now.

Dating back to the time they switched city water to the Flint River, the city could monitor the water pressure. They had to choose not to put the inhibitor in the water. Those practices had to have been reviewed at the state level. I find it hard to believe that it was just incompetence at each link in the chain. Nobody at the state Department of Environmental Quality [at the time] has stepped down.

It is positively mind-blowing that it took so long for the Department of Environmental Quality to believe what the homeowners were telling them.

There are multiple levels of oversight: the federal EPA [Environmental Protection Agency], the state

DEQ [Department of Environmental Quality], the city water department. Yet it takes a nurse and a scientist from a distant university to say that you have a problem.

On the other side of the question, if they made a financial decision to force Detroit into bankruptcy, they started a chain reaction that just got worse and worse. All the time the DEQ reviewed what was going on. That’s the problem. It is a matter of public health, infrastructure and the poisoning of citizens.

If it comes out that the decision was made in order to force Detroit into bankruptcy, isn’t that basically rigging the books? Let’s screw somebody so that we can take their money. I don’t understand why.



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