

As reports point to nationwide epidemic of lead contamination

Michigan governor, EPA head testify on Flint water crisis

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Michigan Governor Rick Snyder and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator Gina McCarthy testified on their roles in covering up the Flint water crisis before the House Oversight Committee Thursday, amid new revelations that up to one-fifth of America's water supply may be contaminated with lead.

Flint's drinking water has been linked to at least 10 deaths stemming from an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease. The city's entire population of about 100,000 people, including some 8,000 children under the age of six, has likely been exposed to elevated lead levels in their drinking water. Elevated blood lead levels, which can lead to irreversible cognitive and developmental damage, has been detected in 221 children and 104 adults in Flint so far. That figure underestimates the actual extent of lead poisoning because of limited testing and the short time that lead actually appears in the bloodstream.

At the hearing, congressmen ritualistically "grilled" Snyder and McCarthy based on their political affiliations, with Republicans taking shots at the Obama-appointed EPA head, and Democrats hurling rhetorical denunciations at the Republican governor. Several called for the resignation of Snyder or McCarthy—often with heated rhetorical sound bites intended for the nightly news.

But on matters of substance the representatives circled the wagons; no one called for the impeachment, firing or criminal prosecution of the officials, despite ample evidence of a criminal conspiracy on both the state and federal level. That is because both parties, which are mutually responsible for the calamity, want an end to further exposures as soon as possible.

Flint is an impoverished, predominantly working-class and multiracial city, which was once a center of US auto production and working-class militancy. In April 2014,

the city switched its water source from Detroit's system—which supplied and treated water from Lake Huron—to the heavily polluted Flint River.

The move, carried out at the instigation of Snyder's appointed state treasurer and Flint emergency manager, both Democrats, received the blessings of local Democratic elected officials, who toasted the changeover with glasses of clean water. The US Environmental Protection Agency, despite warnings, did nothing.

Snyder, one of the most culpable figures in the crisis, sought to spread the guilt around as widely as possible. "This was a failure of government at all levels," Snyder declared. "Local, state and federal officials—we all failed the families of Flint." On the state level, Snyder pointed to negligence by "career bureaucrats" for failing to inform him of the dangers.

In reality, Snyder was warned—repeatedly. US Rep. Elijah Cummings, the Democrat from Maryland, noted that Snyder received an internal email in October 2014 from his head legal adviser recommending that Flint "get back on the Detroit (water) system" as soon as possible "before this thing gets too far out of control." The governor did not order the city to switch its water source until a year later.

But the Environmental Protection Agency was equally culpable, having received complaints by residents for nearly a year before taking any action. In an email released Wednesday, EPA head Gina McCarthy wrote in September 2015 that the issue of Flint's drinking water was "really getting concerning," months before the EPA issued an order requiring the city and state to protect the population.

The EPA silenced its own scientist—Miguel Del Toral—whose tests showed extremely high lead levels. He also reported to superiors that Flint was violating federal

law because it was not treating the highly corrosive river water.

Hundreds of Flint residents, some bringing their children, traveled to Washington to attend the hearing, but were barred from entering the 60-seat hearing room, where space was reserved for dignitaries such as “civil rights activist” and Democratic politician Al Sharpton.

Sixty-seven-year-old Flint resident Doris Patrick, who traveled 14 hours by bus to attend the hearing, took umbrage at being barred from the room, telling the *Wall Street Journal*, “Flint can’t get in the hearing.”

Unlike the members of Congress, who studiously avoided calls for criminal prosecutions, she called for jailing those responsible. “Rick Snyder should be in jail. He should be in prison. He committed a crime. Anyone else would have been arrested by now. Period,” she said.

Resident Lewenna Terry, who traveled to Flint to attend the hearing, said that her son, also in attendance, had been exposed to lead, leading him to experience reduced grades and lower attention span. “The teachers have noticed it’s not just my son but other kids. The whole city has been poisoned,” she told Reuters.

In the face of growing revelations about federal complicity in the poisoning of communities all over the country, the Obama administration made an unequivocal—even gratuitous—public defense of the EPA’s handling of the Flint water crisis, with White House spokesman Josh Earnest declaring Thursday, “There’s a strong case to make that the United States of America has never had a better administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency than Gina McCarthy.”

This statement was rendered all the more wanton by the testimony at an earlier hearing Tuesday by Virginia Tech Professor Marc Edwards, who was among the first to draw national attention to the Flint water crisis.

“EPA had everything to do with creating Flint,” Edwards said, saying the federal regulator has effectively condoned cheating on lead and copper monitoring since at least 2006. He noted that an earlier incident of lead poisoning in Washington, DC between 2001 and 2004 was up to 30 times worse than that in Flint. But he said the EPA “completely covered that up for six years,” creating a “climate where anything goes.”

He added, “If a landlord were to engage in similar practices, and through their negligence, to allow even a single child to be exposed to lead paint risk, the EPA would argue for prosecution and incarceration. Yet, the EPA has allowed entire cities to be unnecessarily exposed to elevated lead in their drinking water and they’ve

covered up evidence of their unethical actions by authoring these falsified scientific reports.”

Further revelations this week give credence to Edwards’ charges of a conspiracy at the local, state and federal levels to cover up a national epidemic of lead contamination.

On Thursday, the UK-based *Guardian* newspaper reported, “startlingly elevated levels of lead were found in the water in Mississippi’s capital in June, but a warning was not issued by government officials until January.” The newspaper said the government found that over one-fifth of homes in Jackson, Mississippi, had lead levels exceeding federal limits, but failed to issue any warning to residents for months.

Even more worryingly, *USA Today* revealed Thursday that hundreds of schools and child care centers have tested positive for lead contamination in drinking water, a rate that represents “20% of the water systems nationally testing above the [EPA’s] ‘action level’ of 15 parts per billion.”

The *USA Today* report noted that drinking water at one school in New York tested at above 5,000 parts per billion, a level that the EPA classifies as “hazardous waste.”

It is becoming increasingly clear that the Flint water crisis represents just the tip of the iceberg. If Dr. Edwards is right about the national drinking water system, as he was in Flint, that means that potentially millions of children may have been and continue to be exposed to dangerous levels of lead throughout the United States, right under the nose of the federal government.

The systematic criminality, falsification and deception at every level of government revealed by the Flint crisis, while certainly an unanswerable indictment of the individuals involved, is in fact an indictment of a whole social order.

This is a society that puts the most basic social needs of the population, including the safety of children, behind the real priorities: funding the military-intelligence-police apparatus to the tune of a trillion dollars a year and securing the perpetual enrichment of the financial oligarchy that dominates American society.



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