

Flint water task force report leaves Snyder off the hook

James Brewer
26 March 2016

A five-member task force on the lead poisoning of Flint water appointed by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder released its 116-page final report at a press conference held in Flint on Wednesday. With utmost cynicism, Snyder—who bears immense personal responsibility for the disaster—introduced the event, assuming the garb of a newly transfigured public health proponent who wanted to make sure such a catastrophe “could never happen again.”

In his opening statement, the governor repeated the lie that he only became aware of the lead danger in October 2015—despite more than a year of complaints by Flint residents and ample evidence that his administration suppressed scientific evidence of dangerously high levels of lead in the water.

“If you go back to October of last year when I first learned that lead was an issue,” the governor said, “one of the things I thought was important is that we start an independent group” that would “get to the bottom” of what happened in an “unbiased way.”

In introducing the report, task force co-chair Chris Kolb, a former Michigan legislator, referred to the role of the people of Flint and professionals like Dr. Marc Edwards, whose team conducted the independent testing of Flint’s water, and Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, the Flint pediatrician who released a study documenting the blood-lead levels in Flint children.

While the report does make some pointed criticisms of governmental agencies, Snyder’s responsibility is reduced to his continuing “to rely on incorrect information provided by” the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), and that only “ultimate accountability” rests with the governor. This analysis lets Snyder off the hook. It does not conflict at all with his deceptive assertion that he was unaware of the lead poisoning until October.

The report, moreover, entirely absolves the Obama administration and its Environmental Protection Agency of any significant responsibility in the disaster.

During the question-and-answer period, Kevin Dietz from WDIV Television asked Snyder why he did not act earlier, when he knew of Legionella contamination and allegations of lead poisoning as early as June. Snyder evaded the question, explaining that he answered the same question “in depth”

before the Congressional hearing last week.

An honest response would point to the governor’s cover-up of the Flint water crisis in order to maintain the use of Flint River water until the completion of the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA) pipeline, when presumably the issue would go away. But following a public outcry and the revelations of Edwards and Hanna-Attisha, Snyder could no longer maintain plausible deniability.

After months of increasingly angry complaints from Flint residents, and following the investigations of Edwards and Hanna-Attisha, the local media began to report on the crisis in Flint. In late September, the *Detroit Free Press* published its own analysis confirming Hanna-Attisha’s findings on the spike in the blood levels of Flint children. On September 30, in response to a reporter’s question, Snyder said for the first time that switching to Flint River water may have been a “mistake.” On October 8, the governor finally ordered the switch back to the treated water supplied by Detroit.

The formation of the Flint Water Advisory Task Force (FWATF), as it is officially known, was announced by Snyder on October 21 of last year. The task force includes co-chairs Kolb and Ken Sikkema, both former Michigan legislators; two pediatricians, Flint resident Dr. Lawrence Reynolds and Dr. Matthew Davis, a professor from the University of Michigan; and Eric Rothstein, a private water consultant.

The first sentence of the executive summary reads, “The Flint water crisis is a story of government failure, intransigence, unpreparedness, delay, inaction, and environmental injustice.” In presenting official transgressions as “mistakes,” the product of an overly bureaucratic culture and a “failure of government,” the criminal and conspiratorial behavior of top officials is effectively concealed.

The body of the report is organized by governmental agencies and lists its findings under each one. Those, according to the task force, that bear the highest responsibility for the water crisis are listed first.

The MDEQ was charged with “primary responsibility for the water contamination in Flint,” with the report stating that it “suffers from cultural shortcomings that prevent it from adequately serving and protecting the public health of Michigan residents.”

The summary timeline presented in the report itemizes many events dating from January 2013 showing that the agency was aware of concerns about the feasibility of using Flint River water even before the switch was made. MDEQ was also informed by the Flint Utilities Department a week before the switch that the department was not prepared. Additionally, it was the MDEQ's director, Dan Wyant, who made the unheard-of mandate that corrosion control was not necessary in the treatment of Flint River water.

The MDHHS is listed second. "MDHHS's lack of timely analysis and understanding of its own data on childhood blood lead levels...prolonged the Flint water crisis," the report states. Both Dr. Edwards and Dr. Hanna-Attisha had been requesting that data from MDHHS and never got it.

Based on documents, including signed contracts, the report states definitively that state-appointed emergency managers made the decision to switch to the Flint River. Ed Kurtz, the city's emergency manager in 2013, contracted Lockwood, Andrews and Newnam Engineering to perform upgrades on the Flint treatment plant to prepare it to use the river water. It was also emergency managers Darnell Earley and Jerome Ambrose who "effectively precluded a return to DWSD [Detroit Water and Sewerage Department] water, as Flint citizens and local officials were demanding..."

The report's finding number 20 says: "The role of the emergency managers in Flint (in combination with MDEQ's failures) places primary accountability for what happened with state government."

The City of Flint and Genesee County Health Department were listed also as having responsibility for the health crisis.

The FWATF report minimizes the responsibility of the EPA for the Flint crisis. It mildly states that the "EPA was hesitant and slow to insist on proper corrosion control measures in Flint. MDEQ misinformation notwithstanding, EPA's deference to MDEQ, the state primacy agency, delayed appropriate intervention and remedial measures."

In his testimony before Congress on March 15, Dr. Edwards differed with that assessment. He described the role of EPA Region 5 administrator Susan Hedman: "Willful blindness, in this case to the pain and suffering of Flint residents, unremorseful for their role in causing this man-made disaster; and completely unrepentant and unable to learn from their mistakes... EPA had everything to do with creating Flint."

Edwards and others have pointed to the fact that the EPA, under both Republican and Democratic administrations, has allowed cities throughout the country to continue using water supplies with lead levels that exceed the agency's own standards.

At the press conference, Snyder referred to the 44 recommendations in the report, claiming to have already taken measures to address all of them. His 75-point "action plan" released Monday is being sold as "taking action on Flint water" (the official slogan from the governor's office).

The first recommendation is that the MDEQ "Implement a proactive, comprehensive cultural change program within MDEQ, specifically its ODWMA [Office of Drinking Water and Municipal Assistance], to refocus the department on its primary mission to protect human health and the environment."

The report's sixteenth recommendation is directed at the governor's office: "Create a culture in state government that is not defensive about concerns and evidence that contradicts official positions, but rather is receptive and open-minded toward that information. View informed opinions—even if critical of state government—as an opportunity for re-assessing state positions, rather than as a threat."

Aside from asking the wolf to guard the henhouse, this approach is specious. The "culture" of indifference and "intransigence" that is demonstrated in the many emails documented in the report is a product of class interests. What the report covers up is that the catastrophe in Flint was directly caused by the parasitism of a ruling elite that seeks to profit from the financial distress of municipalities devastated by decades of deindustrialization.

What the report instead puts forward is the concept of "environmental injustice." The report states, "Environmental injustice is not about malevolent intent or deliberate attacks on specific populations, nor does it come in measures that overtly violate civil rights."

This is a smokescreen. The criminal character of the actions and inactions by government bodies is not touched on. Task force co-chair Ken Sikkema explained on Wednesday, "There are certain areas that were not in our scope—that shouldn't be in our scope—liability, criminal, civil, laws being broken. That's not in our scope."

The public has every right to know the details of how the health threat was concealed. Everyone who was involved in the deliberate political decisions to switch the water in the first place, despite ample health warnings, must be held accountable.

The trend to divert funds from public utilities to the vaults of the super-rich is a product of the capitalist system. A real solution to the crisis in Flint is not a matter of changing the "culture" of government agencies, but of removing the principle of profit from the provision of basic necessities, including clean water.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact