

Research team confirms dangerous levels of lead still contaminate Flint water supply

Carlos Delgado
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At a Tuesday news conference Professor Marc Edwards and the Flint Water Study team at Virginia Tech announced that four months after a federal state of emergency was declared over high levels of lead, Flint's water remains unsafe to drink.

The report followed the group's second round of lead testing. It came two years after the city switched its water supply to the corrosive Flint River, without adding orthophosphate, leading to lead leaching from pipes into the city's water supply, poisoning the city's residents.

The study utilized water samples collected from 187 Flint homes and focused on the 174 homes that participated in both the first and second rounds of testing (the first round was conducted in August 2015). The study found that, while the number of homes with elevated lead levels has decreased, 15 percent of homes still had lead levels above 15 parts per billion (ppb), the federal "action level" established by the EPA. Ten percent of homes had levels above 23 ppb.

Several homes saw their lead levels increase from the first round of testing, in some cases dramatically. The highest concentration of lead discovered was a staggering 2,253 ppb in a home that had tested at 17 ppb in 2015. The average lead concentration across all sampling actually increased between the two sampling rounds, driven largely by homes that had super concentrated lead levels.

The study found no strong correlation between residents' lead levels from one year to the next. This is due to the nature of the pipe corrosion, since chunks of lead piping or solder can break off at any time and cause severe water contamination, even in homes that tested clean for lead in the past. Edwards compared the situation to "Russian roulette," stating that at any point a glass of water could contain extremely high lead

concentration, and there is no way for residents to be sure that their water is safe.

The issue of showering and bathing in the water remains controversial. State and federal officials have repeatedly assured residents that the water is safe for showering and bathing, while residents have continued to report experiencing lesions, rashes and hair loss after coming into contact with the water. In the news conference, Edwards also presented the water as being safe for bathing, while admitting that the relationship between water exposure and rashes is "one of the most understudied issues, scientifically, in the water treatment field."

The nonprofit organization Water Defense, founded by Academy Award nominated actor Mark Ruffalo, has challenged the official line, telling the *Detroit News*, "It is irresponsible and incomprehensible for anyone to declare bathing and showering is safe based on testing sinks and using drinking water standards to declare bath/shower water safe—let alone not even testing bath/shower water for the full spectrum of chemical."

The action plan presented by Edwards at the news conference for repairing the water system focused almost entirely on the need to move more corrosion-controlled water through the system in order to rebuild the protective coating around the lead pipes that had been destroyed by the corrosive Flint River water. The replacement of the lead pipes or the overhaul of the water mains, the only measure that would completely eliminate the threat of lead from the water system, was not seriously addressed.

Even the half-measure of corrosion control is proving to be difficult to implement, since Flint residents have been reluctant to use the water in large quantities. In homes with the highest lead concentration, the study found that the residents were using water at a fraction

of the rate of the national average, due largely to the inability to pay water bills and the fear of contamination. Although state officials have discussed making \$30 million available for residents' water bills over the past months, and this would only involve drinking water as opposed to water for sewerage, so far nothing has been done. It was disclosed that last year even though 40 percent of the population lives below the poverty line and the water was poisoned, residents had the highest water bills in the US.

Edwards noted that, even with normal levels of water use, it still took a year and a half before corrosion control was able to repair the water system in Washington, DC, which suffered a similar lead-in-water crisis in 2004. The Flint system has been receiving this treatment for six months and has still not been able to meet federal standards.

Many Flint residents are voicing opposition to using Flint tap water for bathing. Melissa Mays, a Flint resident and member of the community action group Water You Fighting For, voiced her anger and opposition in this video taken April 13, 2016 one day after the Virginia Tech news conference.

Water Defense tested her water, which is burning her family's eyes, skin and causing hair loss. The testing found many carcinogenic byproducts including dichlorine benzene and chloroform.

While Flint families are angry that next to nothing has been done to resolve the water crisis, the tone of the news conference was generally optimistic, in line with anxious official attempts to present the water system as being on a "path to recovery." Dr. Edwards' attitude toward government officials expressed at Tuesday's press conference softened from that shown in earlier interviews and his Congressional testimony last month. After earlier denouncing the role of the EPA in covering up the lead levels and conspiring to silence those who sought to raise the alarm about Flint, Edwards gave a "shout out to the great work being done by EPA" in distributing lead filters to Flint residents, a stopgap measure that can only provide temporary help.

Edwards has been brought onto various committees involving the EPA and the state of Michigan in an effort to provide them with an aura of legitimacy. Edwards has stated that he is prepared to work with anyone whom he feels will help Flint get back on its

feet. While his concerns may be genuine, the aims of the EPA and the state are not. The federal EPA and the state of Michigan are in desperate need of a cover following the exposure of their criminal role in allowing the poisoning of an entire city with lead-tainted water.

After the press conference Edwards reportedly told the *Roanoke Times* that his team is facing major financial struggles. Edwards said that work in Flint cost his lab \$250,000, plus the equivalence of five years' worth of work hours. The lab requires \$850,000 annually to operate, but has raised a little less than \$100,000 on a GoFundMe page and gotten a National Science Foundation Grant worth \$33,000.

Edwards ended the session by stating that Flint needed money and that the water system in Flint was in very poor condition. Edwards said he believed the lead pipes needed to be replaced and the water mains upgraded. "... [T]he water mains in Flint are also in very, very bad shape. And until they are rehabilitated in a proactive way, I don't think the system is really financially sustainable. I really feel that the federal government as well as the state government owes it to Flint to help upgrade the water main system so that the system can become financially sustainable."

However, the state of Michigan and the US federal government have demonstrated again and again that they have no intention of providing the financial resources needed to provide safe water to Flint residents, let alone the hundreds of communities across the country facing a similar danger of lead and water.



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