

State officials work to obscure water crisis in Flint

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Michigan Governor Rick Snyder's close aide and point man over the Flint water crisis told a CBS news affiliate earlier this week that "Things are getting back to normal" in the city whose water supply was lead poisoned. In what was cited as a rare interview, Harvey Hollins claimed the state's primary challenge is the need to "develop and build trust."

Indeed. Before he was appointed by Snyder to head the state's response to Flint's water crisis last December, Hollins, as one of the governor's closest aides, received an email from the Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) in March of 2015, while the city had been using the Flint River as its water source for almost a year, warning of the increased number of cases of Legionnaires' Disease, a deadly form of pneumonia, in Flint. Hollins claimed that he never informed Snyder. The disease claimed 12 lives in Flint alone in 2015.

In February this year when the email was uncovered, Hollins defended his lack of action, blaming MDEQ officials and declared, "I don't feel any responsibility for grown-ups who don't do their jobs." Judging from Hollins' past practice, his job is to keep the bad press about the disgraceful conditions in Flint as quiet as possible.

Hollins' complacent statement came only days after Snyder appointed Heidi Grether, a former oil lobbyist and BP executive, as the new head of the MDEQ. The choice of Grether speaks volumes about the official response to the ongoing crisis in Flint.

Grether has a long and sordid history representing oil companies and environmental polluters. After serving as the Legislative Director for the Michigan Speaker of the House of Representatives in 1993, she took advantage of the "revolving door" between government and corporate lobbying and became a lobbyist for the

oil industry, representing BP and the Amoco corporation for over 15 years.

In May 2010, after the Deepwater Horizon oil rig disaster killed 11 workers and released 4.9 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, Grether was put in charge of BP's "Communications and External Affairs" for the disaster, a propaganda role tasked with disseminating misinformation to shield the company from litigation and criminal liability. She ascended to become General Manager of External Affairs for the Gulf Coast region, where, as her online resume boasts, she ensured that "no legislation adverse to BP [was] introduced in the Gulf states."

Thanks to the work of Grether and the friendly audience she found in the Obama administration, no top BP executive was held criminally responsible, and only a pittance in fines has been paid out for the worst environmental catastrophe in US history.

Grether's online resume lists, along with such valuable skills as the ability to build business partnerships and influence government and environmental affairs, her ability to offer "outstanding interpersonal and rapport-building skills to influence public policy and maintain stakeholder relationships." Though nothing in her history suggests that she is in any way qualified to head a department tasked with maintaining environmental quality, her appointment is entirely in line with the state's imperative to cater to the interests of corporate polluters and resume the environmentally degrading operations of big business.

Grether takes over from interim director Keith Creagh, who served in the position after the previous director, Dan Wyant, resigned in disgrace over the Flint water crisis. Wyant's tenure was marked by a fawning attitude toward big business and a callous disregard toward the environmental effects of their operations.

When the city of Flint switched its water supply from treated Detroit water to the corrosive Flint River, Wyant's department mandated that corrosion control was not necessary in its treatment. This set off a chain reaction that led to widespread lead leaching and poisoning in the city of Flint.

Though the city has since ceased using Flint River water, dangerous levels of lead continue to leach from the damaged pipes, with experts referring to drinking the water as a game of "Russian roulette." The declaration of emergency that has allowed the Federal Emergency Management Agency to provide water, filters, cartridges and test kits to Flint residents is scheduled to end on August 14, even though researchers insist that unfiltered Flint water will not be safe to drink for some time. Obama administration officials have repeatedly asserted that an extension of the deadline is off the table.

Though Flint residents have called for the replacement of all lead lines in the city, government officials from Obama on down have declared that no such measure will be taken. Instead, the local and state governments have offered a series of half measures aimed at defusing popular anger. Flint Mayor Karen Weaver recently announced a plan to replace the lead water lines for 250 homes in the city, a miniscule fraction of the total number of homes that are at risk.

The city and state are eager to silence residents' concerns and return the city to "normal" in order to continue the monetization and privatization schemes that wreaked havoc on the water system in the first place. Powerful financial interests have a stake in severing the connection between the Detroit and Flint water systems, and many hope to profit from the Karegnondi Water Authority pipeline that is slated to provide raw, untreated water for the region.

Flint residents also pay some of the highest water rates in the nation, with recently released emails showing that top officials from the Michigan Department of Human Services considered the rates to be "gouging."

Grether's history suggests that she will likely be tasked with conducting a two-pronged "external affairs" PR campaign to convince residents to drink the water and assure corporate polluters that Michigan is open for business again. Her appointment angered many in the city of Flint, with activist Melissa Mays

stating, "I am infuriated but not shocked that Snyder chose to appoint someone who had a hand in one of the worst man-made water disasters and cleanup failures in history to head the MDEQ."



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