

Testimony in Flint water hearings details social crime against city residents

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A key former water plant operator for the city of Flint, Michigan recently gave pretrial testimony that city and state officials pushed through the water supply switch, which resulted in at least a dozen fatalities and poisoning up to 100,000 others—knowing that the treatment facilities were woefully inadequate.

In two days of courtroom questioning in late February, Michael Glasgow, a water quality supervisor for Flint, reiterated that his early 2014 email warnings about plant operational deficiencies were uniformly ignored at multiple levels of government in the days leading up to the switch.

Glasgow's testimony was part of the concluding preliminary hearings for the prosecution of top Michigan state health official Nick Lyon. The former head of the state's top public health agency, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), is charged with involuntary manslaughter, stemming from the official cover-up of the outbreak of Legionnaire's disease between 2014-2015, which resulted in at least 12 confirmed deaths and 80 illnesses.

Lyon is one of 15 state officials who were charged in 2016 by Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette with crimes related to the poisoning of the water supply in Flint. None have gone to trial yet, many are preparing to accept plea agreements for lesser charges, and several key officials involved, such as Republican Governor Rick Snyder and Democratic State Treasurer Andy Dillon, have yet to face any charges.

Glasgow was one of the lower-level officials of the 15 charged with crimes, for tampering with evidence related to filing of altered reports on lead levels. Glasgow has maintained that he was ordered to tamper with reports from leading Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) officials above him.

He accepted a plea agreement in exchange for his testimony against Lyon.

On April 26, 2014, Flint officials switched the city's water supply from treated water from Lake Huron, long supplied by the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, to the untreated water from the polluted Flint River. Nine days before the switch Glasgow wrote officials—including now-fired Office of Drinking Water (ODW) director Liane Shekter-Smith, ODW coordinator Stephen Busch, water engineer Michael Prysby, and drinking water specialist Patrick Cook—that the city's long-mothballed water plant was not prepared for the switch and he requested more time for training and preparations.

Glasgow cited numerous problems, including ozone and clarifying equipment that were not functioning properly, the inability to use phosphates to coat the city's pipes and prevent them from leaching unsafe chemicals, and new staff that had little background in water treatment.

"I have people above me making plans to distribute water ASAP" Glasgow wrote to the DEQ on April 17, 2014. "If water is distributed from this plant in the next couple of weeks, it will be against my directions. I need time to adequately train additional staff and to update our monitoring plans before I will feel we are ready. I will reiterate this to management above me, but they seem to have their own agenda."

In courtroom hearings, Glasgow reiterated this position, and confirmed that he was getting pressure to proceed from state-appointed Emergency Financial Manager Darnell Earley's office. He told prosecutors that no one in city management responded to his concerns, so he tried going a level up to the DEQ but faced the same indifference.

He told city and state management the plant would

need at least double the current staff, and would have to conduct 24-hour-a-day monitoring of samples to ensure proper water treatment but was forced to proceed with what he described as an ill-prepared “skeleton crew.” He testified that no DEQ officials came to inspect the plant before the switch, a common operational expectation.

“I think the city was rushing to meet a deadline to turn the plant on ... I voiced [my concerns] to my management in the city. And when they didn’t seem to listen, I had to contact a couple of DEQ staff [Prysby and Busch] via email about my concerns.”

He continued, “After a week of not a response, I figured this was really happening, now there was nothing I could do to stop the plant from operation. I said my piece, to no avail, to many different entities and left it at that and tried to focus on getting the plant ready to run.”

Glasgow also testified that his staff began noticing a sharp uptick in complaints from residents after the water switch before the poisonous lead-levels were discovered. Two water boil warnings were issued in August-September of 2014 after discovering fecal coliform bacteria, but the DEQ never came to inspect the plant nor instruct officials to stop running the plant.

The testimony of Glasgow came a few days after John O’Brien, division director of the Genesee County Drain Commission, confirmed that Earley and other city officials ignored his warnings that the water treatment plant should not be put into service at all after 50 years of disuse.

The preliminary hearings continue to expose the basic truth that a massive social crime was perpetrated against the population of Flint, carried out by both political parties and significant sections of the corporate and financial elite. The switch to the Flint River was part of a scheme to build a new pipeline, under the control of the so-called Karegnondi Water Authority, to enrich private contractors and wealthy bondholders.

Nearly four years on, Flint workers and youth still face a public health disaster, which has impacted every facet of life in the economically depressed former General Motors manufacturing center. Tens of thousands of lead-leached pipes have yet to be removed from the city’s infrastructure and replaced. Badly needed comprehensive medical care has not been provided for nearly 9,000 children who have likely

been permanently harmed by the developmental effects of lead poisoning, to say nothing of the health of 90,000 adults.

Recent reports from the MDEQ indicate that there may have even been a spike in lead levels at elementary schools in the past two months. Emerging reports have surfaced that reveal that the city has already quietly started to shut off water from residents who owe outstanding payments on water bills. The state of Michigan is also currently in deliberations to end its funding of bottled water for the residents.



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