

Top Michigan environmental safety officials resign amidst ongoing Flint water crisis

By Matthew Brennan
31 December 2015

On Tuesday Dan Wyant and Brad Wurfel, the Director and Communication Director respectively of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), resigned from their posts after a newly published report claimed that their department was “primarily responsible” for the widespread lead in water, poisoning the residents of Flint, Michigan.

The resignations were announced by Republican Governor Rick Snyder, who also implied that more resignations would follow and issued a formal “apology” to the residents of Flint.

The resignations and crocodile tears are an attempt by Snyder to obscure the criminal role both he and his self-appointed Emergency Financial Managers (EFM) in Flint and Detroit have played in creating the massive public health crisis.

In his apology Snyder blamed Flint’s “aging infrastructure” for the current crisis. However, it is widely understood that the April 2014 decision by EFM Darnell Earley to switch the city’s water source to corrosive water drawn from the Flint River was the major catalyst for the leached-lead contamination.

The Flint Advisory Task Force Report, issued a day before the resignations, is a further attempt at damage control by Snyder. The governor assembled the five-person advisory group responsible for the report in late October, after damning reports issued by a Virginia Tech research team nearly two months earlier independently uncovered significant levels of lead in the Flint water supply.

The Virginia Tech research project took place after local residents of Flint reached out to the researchers, following more than a year of complaints and protests to city and state officials that went nowhere.

City and state officials in turn repeatedly assured residents that the water was safe to drink, despite

severe discoloration, acrid smell and taste, and official acknowledgment that excessively high levels of cancer-causing trihalomethane (TTHM) chlorine agents were found in the water in January of 2015.

The Virginia Tech water exposures were also corroborated by the independent research of Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, Pediatric Director at Hurley Children’s Medical Center in Flint. She independently reported in late September that her team had discovered significantly elevated blood lead levels for 1- and 2-year-olds from the same city neighborhoods where poisoned water samples were being drawn by the Virginia Tech team. Both teams issued urgent public health statements.

These reports and complaints were systematically dismissed and downplayed by both the MDEQ and Snyder’s office up until October 8.

The Flint Advisory Task Force Report describes the behavior of the MDEQ towards the poisoned water exposures as “one of aggressive dismissal, belittlement, and attempts to discredit these efforts and the individuals involved...What is disturbing about MDEQ’s responses...is their persistent tone of scorn and derision. In fact, the MDEQ seems to have been more determined to discredit the work of others—who ultimately proved to be right—than to pursue its own oversight responsibility...”

However, the attempt by the Task Force to lay blame solely or primarily on the MDEQ is a red herring. It should be noted that Snyder’s Director of Communication Sara Wurfel (wife of the MDEQ’s Brad Wurfel) repeatedly issued statements supporting the MDEQ’s efforts to discredit the research of the Virginia Tech team and Dr. Hanna-Attisha.

Snyder’s office, which consistently defended the decision to make the switch to the Flint River water

source as an “unavoidable” step that had support “within the community,” even issued an email stating that Hanna-Attisha’s team “sliced and diced” the data of her report for “emotional” reasons.

There are also new allegations that the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) attempted to minimize the significance of the Flint River water crisis. In a December 21 interview, Virginia Tech’s Dr. Marc Edwards also claimed that the DHHS actively hid evidence that they collected which replicated elevated blood level results similar to those which came from the Hurley Medical Research team.

According to FOIA-retrieved email documents, this coverup may have been known as early as the summer of 2014, fully a year before Edwards’ exposures brought national attention to the Flint water crisis.

In the larger context, the lead poisoning of the Flint population is connected to a broader chain of developments that underscore the irrationality of the capitalist profit system. In Michigan this has been expressed most sharply by the imposition of the EFMs and effective suspension of democratic rights.

At every level of government the drive for extracting profit out of Flint and Detroit under the unelected, anti-democratic managers has overridden any concern for the safety and health of millions of southeast Michigan workers and children.

The drive to switch the Flint water supply away from the long-running Detroit Water and Sewage Department connection, and toward the newly formed Karegnondi Water Authority, was part of the broader effort by Snyder and Detroit EFM Kevyn Orr to “regionalize” and privatize southeast Michigan water systems in the interests of wealthy business interests.

The imposition of state-appointed EFMs in both cities set in motion the current crisis, and led to the lead poisoning of Flint’s water. Lead poisoning can cause, among other things, irreversible damage to internal organs, behavioral disorders, and brain development dysfunction in children.

The full extent of the Flint water crisis is still not known. On December 21, Dr. Hanna-Attisha’s team released another report in the *American Journal of Public Health* that revealed that in some of the most economically disadvantaged areas of Flint the rates of elevated blood lead levels in children aged 0-5 has

tripled to nearly 15% of the total population.

In recent interviews Dr. Hanna-Attisha has noted she believes that her initial reports “underestimate the risk of exposure,” particularly to the city’s roughly 9,000 children under the age of six. Speaking to the *Guardian*, she noted that blood lead levels are only detectable for 30 days, and previous exposure for most of the city’s population (approximately 100,000) would be impossible to fully detect, since it goes back possibly over the last 18 months.

“This is an emergency,” she told the press on Wednesday. “People think of disasters as being hurricanes, or tornadoes, or ice storms, but this is a disaster right here in Flint that is alarming and absolutely gut-wrenching...We are assuming that the entire population of the city of Flint has been exposed, if you drank the water or cooked with the water.”

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