

Water quality official warned Flint, Michigan was not prepared for switch to Flint River

By James Brewer
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Revelations continue to emerge pointing to the criminal activities of authorities that resulted in the poisoning of the drinking water of Flint. The new evidence is included in some 20,000 pages of emails related to Flint's water that were released by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder on February 12.

One of the most damning is an email by a water quality official warning that the city's water plant was not prepared for the planned switch to the Flint River on April 25, 2014 and could not monitor the safety of the water on time.

Mike Glasgow, Laboratory & Water Quality Supervisor for the City of Flint, warned eight days before the switch, in an April 17, 2014 email to Adam Rosenthal of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), "I was reluctant before, but after looking at the monitoring schedule and our current staffing, I do not anticipate giving the OK to begin sending water out anytime soon." He added, "If water is distributed from this plant in the next couple weeks, it will be against my direction."

In the same email, Glasgow complained, "I have people above me making plans to distribute water ASAP" and "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."

The Flint Water Treatment Plant (WTP) had not been used to chemically treat water for 50 years. Drinking water had been supplied to the city by the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) since 1965, and since 1974, it came directly from Lake Huron, the third-largest of the Great Lakes through a newly-built 72-inch pipeline. This delivered treated water from the then brand-new Lake Huron Treatment Plant, run by the DWSD.

The "agenda" Glasgow referred to evolved from a scheme hatched in 2007 by Genesee County Drain Commissioner Jeff Wright called the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA) pipeline. Intending to garner the participation of three Michigan counties: Sanilac, Lapeer and Genesee, the plan, required the commitment of Genesee County's largest city, Flint. The KWA pipeline, once built, would parallel the DWSD Lake Huron pipeline, but would be several miles to the north—a completely irrational use of resources. The project has led to

what one DWSD official called a "water war."

A critical point to note is that the KWA plan, as opposed to what the DWSD had been providing for years, would require the Flint WTP to treat the raw Lake Huron water.

A March 2013 email between Michigan State Treasurer Andy Dillon and Stephen Busch of the DEQ raised concerns—a month before Flint's then-Emergency Manager Ed Kurtz signed on with the KWA and more than a year before switching from DWSD—over the risks involved with the use of the Flint WTP to process Flint River water. Analyzing a study that Dillon himself had contracted from engineering firm Tucker, Young Jackson and Tull (TYJT) to evaluate the switch from DWSD water, Busch noted: "Continued use of the Flint River at such demand rates would: a. Pose an increased microbial risk to public health; b. Pose an increased risk of disinfection by-product (carcinogen) exposure to public health; c. Trigger additional regulatory requirements under the Michigan Safe Drinking Water Act; d. Require significant enhancements to the Flint WTP."

Each one of these points were realized after the switch. Cases of Legionnaires' Disease spiked, resulting in 10 deaths, E. coli appeared in Flint's drinking water, then as a result of over chlorinating to kill bacteria, trihalomethanes were introduced into people's tap water.

Busch's email noted that the Flint WTP would require "significant enhancements," knowing full well that the manpower level and technical ability to apply corrosion control chemicals to the water did not exist in that outdated facility. The failure to add phosphates, which form a protective layer around pipes, resulted in the leaching of lead and other chemicals from the city's antiquated pipe system into the water supply.

Yet, Treasurer Dillon, a Democrat, disregarded the warnings and approved the switch, despite the \$357 million cost estimate—\$100 million higher than KWA estimates—in the TYJT study. Besides pointing out that Flint would not have a seat on the water board despite being responsible for 30 percent of the pipeline construction cost and therefore having no say on possible future rate hikes, the study reported that the KWA would be less cost-effective than any of the proposals presented by the DWSD. The report added, "Separating the water system

appears to run counter to the Treasury's efforts of consolidating services."

Kurtz was already pushing for the KWA option as early as January 2013, and held a January 28 meeting with pipeline engineers, Wright, Flint officials and representatives from the Michigan Treasury department to lobby for the deal, as documented in another email.

After getting the okay from Dillon, Kurtz signed the deal in April 2013. Groundbreaking on the pipeline followed in June.

Since the KWA plan duplicated the already underutilized DWSD pipeline, the motivations behind the new pipeline remain shady. Scenes of Roman Polanski's 1974 film "Chinatown" are brought to mind. Control of water resources is an enormous political and financial boondoggle as illustrated early in 2011, when DTE Energy told the KWA that it would be interested in purchasing 3 million gallons of raw Lake Huron water daily, for cooling its Greenwood electrical plant.

Wright announced the offer at a board meeting, saying that others could follow, "as more businesses are made aware of (what we are doing and) the lower cost of untreated water."

An indication of the avarice behind the KWA project is Wright's 2007-2008 hiring of Sam Riddle, a corrupt Detroit official during the infamous terms of Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, who is currently serving a 28-year prison term for crimes committed in office. While chief of staff for Detroit Council President Monica Conyers, who also served time in prison for bribery, Riddle ran an extortion racket. Wright retained him as a "consultant" to help the KWA acquire the needed permits to construct the pipeline. In 2010, it was revealed publicly that Wright served as an FBI informant, recording conversations with Riddle to assist in prosecuting him.

What did the FBI have on Wright to get him become an informant? There is public speculation that Wright faced money laundering charges from his 2000 election campaign to become drain commissioner and that was the leverage that the US intelligence agency used. According to a *Detroit Free Press* article from February 9, "Former Genesee County Prosecutor Arthur Busch told the *Free Press* this week he wanted to charge Wright with money laundering in 2005 but was unable to do so because of legal issues involving the statute of limitations."

It is becoming clearer that the force driving the decisions to sever relations with the DWSD and then to use the polluted Flint River as the city's water source, had nothing to do with protecting the citizens of Flint from rate increases. Rather, the predatory schemes of a few well-placed individuals ruthlessly determined to turn the economic duress faced by the mass of the populace into a source of massive profits. This included efforts by Dillon to further undermine the financial position of Detroit in order to justify throwing the city into bankruptcy, slashing city worker pensions and preparing the privatization of public assets, including the DWSD.

When the City of Flint did make the April 2014 switch from DWSD water to the Flint River, a deep-going conspiracy against the population stepped into action. The newly released emails show just how deep the complicity went. The same MDEQ Lansing District Supervisor Stephen Busch—now suspended pending Snyder's investigation—who internally warned of the risks involved with using Flint River water in early 2013, rewarded MDEQ staff more than two years later with a pay increase for lying to worried residents who complained about the safety of their drinking water.

The emails released last Friday by Snyder's office expose the depth of the criminality of public officials in Michigan over the Flint disaster, but Flint is just the tip of the iceberg. The *New York Times* published an editorial on Sunday titled, "Fixing Our Broken Water Systems." It warned, "The country has invested too little in its public works as governments at all levels have become obsessed with cutting spending." Pointing to similar lead-in-water disasters such as in Sebring, Ohio, the newspaper cites figures of \$384 billion by the EPA and \$1 trillion by the American Water Works Association over the next decades to continue providing safe water to the population, and warns Congress to act.

The *Times* expresses the concerns of the capitalist class. While warning that the reactionary drivel of Republican candidate Donald Trump, saying that the entire Environmental Protection Agency can be scrapped, more conscious layers in the ruling elite know that they must at least pay lip service to the right to clean drinking water in order to prevent a further growth of social opposition. Predictably, the *Times* does not mention the Obama administration, which has overseen the further undermining of the nation's infrastructure, while providing endless resources for Wall Street and the Pentagon war machine, while championing the further privatization of public services.

The disaster in Flint is but one example of the decades of political policies of both capitalist parties—deregulation, attacks on public services and on the jobs, wages, healthcare and pensions of public employees. At the same time the determined opposition of working class residents in Flint who stood up against the lies and machinations of government agencies has brought these social crimes to light throughout the US and the world.

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