
From: Adler, Ari (GOV)
Sent: Friday, January 23, 2015 9:26 AM
To: Agen, Jarrod (GOV); Walsh, John (GOV)
Subject: Flint water PR

This is a public relations crisis – because of a real or perceived problem is irrelevant -- waiting to explode nationally.

If Flint had been hit with a natural disaster that affected its water system, the state would be stepping in to provide bottled water and other assistance. What can we do given the current circumstances?

Ari

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 <http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/01/22/water-woes-latest-hit-flint/22193291/>

Who wants to drink Flint's water?

By Robin Erb, Detroit Free Press 11:46 p.m. EST January 22, 2015



LeeAnne Walters 36 of Flint shows water samples from her home from Wednesday January 21, 2015 to Flint's new emergency manager Jerry Ambrose after city and state officials spoke during a forum discussing growing health concerns about the drinking water being raised by Flint residents on Wednesday January 21, 2015 at the Flint City Hall dome. (Photo: Ryan Garza, Detroit Free Press)

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Story Highlights

- Last fall, the city issued three advisories to boil the water after detecting coliform bacteria.
- One resident calls it "poop water."
- The water woes are the latest blows to a city where residents have felt swatted around for too long.

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In a city where residents have felt under siege for years — from crime, bad press and an emergency manager some feel forced upon them — the newest threat pours from kitchen spigots and showerheads.

It's the reason behind mysterious rashes on local children, parents say. Unexplained illnesses. Even sick pets.

Bethany Hazard said it's the reason for the brown rust circles that began appearing just months ago around her drains and the oily film in her bathwater in her longtime east-side home.

On the west side of Flint, Corodon Maynard said it's the reason he was bent retching violently over the toilet this month — just hours after chugging two glasses of water at bedtime.

"I was throwing up like bleach water. It came up through my nose burning," said the 20-year-old.

The water from the city system is so corrosive, according to General Motors officials, that the automaker's Flint Engine Operations pulled off the city water system, connecting instead into a water system operated by nearby Flint Township.

So what's in Flint's water and just how dangerous is it?

It depends on who you ask and what tests you're referring to.

State tests suggest the water is clear of coliform bacteria, which can suggest the presence of other disease-carrying pathogens.

But as a result of treating the water to kill any dangerous microorganisms, the water now carries low levels of Total Trihalomethane, or TTHM, a by-product of the disinfectants. Years of exposure may cause liver, kidney or central nervous system problems and an increased risk of cancer, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The city maintains the water — pulled from the Flint River rather than the Detroit water system that had served the city for years — is safe.

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Detroit invites Flint to rejoin water system amid residents' complaints

Mayor Dayne Walling who was born and raised in Flint, said he drinks it.

The river, long known for the toxins left from Flint's industrial years, is cleaner than it has been in years, "but that perception persists," Walling said.

That the possibility of bacteria and the TTHM levels were detected and then diminished, he said, is proof that the system works.

But the system is in desperate need of infrastructure improvements and experienced water treatment staff, Walling said.

Earlier this week, he asked for help from Gov. Rick Snyder to implement a new plan that called for those things.

"There is nothing more important in Flint right now than fixing the water problems," he wrote.

And communication is key, he added.

Experts talk

In a city hall meeting Wednesday, the city invited experts to talk to residents. They included representatives from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, the EPA, and a Michigan State University microbiologist whose life work has been in studying water safety.

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Crowd outbursts cut Flint water meeting short as health concerns grow

In an immediate sense, the water is safe to drink, they assured the crowd.

Discoloration is most likely iron and calcium being sloughed off old city pipes as new water is being pushed into the system.

But while scientists talked in terms of parts-per-billion and testing and chemical reactions and future monitoring, residents held onto jugs of discolored water — water they said tasted funny and smelled terrible.

That's where it gets tricky, said Joan Rose, the MSU microbiologist.

When it comes to a life-giving liquid we turn to countless times a day for survival, appearance and smell is important as well as keeping it clean of pathogens and toxins, she said.

"You're so intimate with water. You drink it. You wash with it. You bathe in it," she said. "You can't blame anyone for the frustration. Everyone wants safe and wholesome water."

This much can be agreed upon: The city's water problems have worn residents raw with anger.

Some claim city officials are trying to cover up missteps and even political shenanigans. Some have accused city leadership of outright poisoning them.

"I've taken to calling it 'poop water,' " said Nayyirah Shariff, a community activist for the grassroots group Democracy Defense League.

Many said they are ready to abandon longtime homes.

"What we have is a full-blown crisis," said GM retiree Claire McClinton who had bundled up against the snow earlier this week to run into El Potrero Mexican restaurant for a late lunch.

But she reconsidered at the last minute and walked out instead, worried about eating at restaurants that rely on city water in their kitchens.

She's not the only customer who is concerned.

Business overall has been hit "probably 20 to 30%," said manager Jorge Alcazar.

The restaurant's lifeblood is in customers seeking a quick, affordable lunch, often with a glass of ice water.

Unwilling to drink the tap water, customers also don't want to pay \$2 or more for a pop or buy a bottled water.

Worse for waitress Ashley Trujillo, customers have argued with staff. One customer left three pennies as a tip after fuming about having to pay for water. Others have left nothing.

"Like we have something to do with it," Trujillo said.

All of this — the frustration, the slump in El Potrero's business, the jam-packed meetings with residents toting jugs of brown water and claims they are being poisoned — are the latest blows to a city that has felt swatted around for too long.

"People think all the crime happens in Flint and everyone is poor in Flint, so there's this stigma. Now we're fighting against dirty water. Really?" said radiology coder Cindy Marshall, who joined about two dozen protesters earlier this week.

"Are you trying to kill us?" read one sign. "No more poison," read another.

McClinton echoed Marshall's sentiments: "We've lost confidence in the city."

Soaring bills

For years, residents in this city bleeding jobs and soaked in red ink have been facing growing water bills. Some have climbed as high as several hundred dollars a month.

"We have residents choosing between water and groceries and other bills," said Hazard, whose own bill is about \$100 a month for a single person.

"I feel like I'm going under," said Hazard, who survived cancer twice and who was forced into early retirement and limited income.

The city eventually decided to dump the Detroit system in favor of the Karegnondi Water Authority, which is building a system to supply Genesee County with water pulled from Lake Huron. In the long run, this will mean lower water costs, officials have said.

Under the plan, Flint is temporarily pulling water from the Flint River until the water authority's system comes online, expected in 2016.

In August and September, however, the city issued three advisories to boil the water after detecting coliform bacteria.

Just before Christmas, residents received notices that state tests indicated higher-than-acceptable levels of trihalomethane, the disinfectant by-product.

Hazard's cats have been sick. So has she and several neighbors. Even her houseplant began to die.

Maynard threw up. Residents complained of rashes and mysterious illnesses.

"We just want safe water. How hard is that?" Hazard asked.

But assurances come with qualifiers.

The chlorine did its job and cleaned the water of microbial pathogens that can cause disease within days. That means the water is safe for healthy people to drink for a short time, said Michael Prysby, a district engineer in the state's Office of Drinking Water and Municipal Assistance.

But the trade-off was TTMH — possibly a danger for the very young, the very old, or the very sick if they ingest it long-term, he added.

"But we're talking decades," he said, adding that those who are worried should talk to their doctors.

"We don't want to make a blanket statement to say water is safe or unsafe. It's misleading both ways."

That's the kind of answer that infuriates Marshall, the protester and mother of a 5-year-old.

"They said it's safe, but it's brown water," said Marshall, also a radiology coder, after the meeting. "Why do we have to drink brown water? No one else has to drink brown water."

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