

Peeler, Nancy (DHHS)

From: Scott, Robert L. (DCH)
Sent: Friday, September 11, 2015 1:09 PM
To: Peeler, Nancy (DCH); Lishinski, Karen (DCH); Priem, Wesley F. (DCH)
Subject: Flint water study
Attachments: Rapid Proposal Final.pdf

Nancy, Karen and Wes,

I'm passing this along as follow-up to our previous attention to the Flint water changeover situation. The attached was submitted to me along with a request for de-identified data, which should be no problem.

When you have a few minutes you might want to take a look at it. Sounds like there might be more to this than what we learned previously. Yikes!

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A. Project Summary

Overview: Flint, MI, is currently suffering from a “perfect storm” attributable to out-of-control corrosion of its potable water distribution system. The corrosion is undermining water affordability for residents, financial viability of city government, water aesthetics, and hygiene/sanitation as revealed in local and national news reporting. We *hypothesize* that these circumstances will also create severe chemical/biological health risks for Flint residents, including elevated levels of lead and opportunistic premise plumbing pathogens (OPPPs) in drinking water. Preliminary data collected from a home of a lead poisoned child in Flint has revealed extraordinarily high levels of lead, with average concentrations over 20 minutes of water use exceeding 2,000 ppb (> 200 times the World Health Organization allowable levels for lead in potable water).

The main *objectives* of this research are to: 1) compare levels of chlorine, iron, fecal indicator bacteria, OPPPs, and corrosion-inducing bacteria present in water mains of a distribution system with uncontrolled corrosion (Flint) versus surrounding cities/counties still using non-corrosive water, 2) profile OPPPs occurrence in hot and cold potable water systems at these same locations, and 3) determine if there is evidence of elevated lead in Flint homes, and, if so, forensically determine the links to iron corrosion. Our team is uniquely qualified to do this work given our just published peer reviewed research on this subject and our extensive collaborations with key stakeholders in Flint.

Intellectual Merit: The four elements of the “perfect storm” currently undermining water quality (and possibly public health) in Flint include: a) chronic underinvestment in water infrastructure, b) under-appreciation of the role of corrosion control in sustaining urban potable water systems, c) increased corrosion due to higher chloride in Flint’s new source water, and d) failure to appropriately monitor for lead and OPPPs. The latter two factors are amongst the most important health problems arising in modern potable water systems. The high rates of corrosion occurring in Flint are releasing high levels of iron to water and consuming chlorine disinfectant, which our most recent laboratory testing has indicated will increase lead release to water and growth of OPPPs in cold and hot water plumbing systems. The unfortunate but unique opportunity offered by Flint’s current situation, provides an ideal opportunity to field test our recent discoveries regarding potentially adverse consequences of iron corrosion on chemical/microbiological water quality at field rather than laboratory scale.

Broader Impacts: This RAPID grant will directly assist residents of Flint in assessing the current safety of their potable water supply. If the results support recently issued public assurances regarding safety of water, the current problems in Flint can be considered mainly of aesthetics and perception due to very distasteful or discolored water. However, if sampling reveals widespread problems, the public will learn of the potential health threat. Since elements of the “perfect storm” afflicting Flint are occurring at some level in many other financially stressed U.S. urban centers with decaying drinking water infrastructure, this Rapid Response Research (RAPID) grant also provides an unprecedented opportunity to advance fundamental scientific and practical understanding at this emerging nexus of infrastructure-environmental engineering-public health. The general results and approach used herein can inform residents and managers of other U.S. cities, who will soon be dealing with similar problems associated with failing potable water infrastructure exacerbated by increased chloride in water due to excessive use of road salt and rising sea levels. The research also provides a compelling case study in *Citizen Science*, since the experiences of Flint parents in monitoring their children’s health and environmental exposures was a trigger for our preliminary testing, and Flint consumers will be scientifically empowered by participating in fundamental research relying on collection of samples from their homes and residences. There is also a social justice implication of the research, in that these results can help inform the current policy debate regarding strategies for dealing with cities that have gone bankrupt, as well as the discussion of access to safe and affordable drinking water as a basic human right.