

DEQ EMPLOYEES SEEM UNWILLING TO TAKE THE FALL FOR FLINT

During yesterday's Congressional hearing – and really, since the Governor's hand-picked Task Force first gave him an interim report in December – employees from Michigan's Department of Environmental Quality have come in for most of the blame for poisoning Flint.

But today, Progress Michigan published some emails that suggest DEQ's employees are unwilling to take the fall, at least not by themselves. They show that in March of last year, a supervisor in Genesee County's health department wrote people in Flint and at DEQ asking for help with data on water quality after getting no response to a FOIA in January 2015.

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Subject: Information Request and Documentation

In the email, the supervisor noted that a spike in Legionnaires coincided with the switch to Flint's water. Jerry Ambrose was then the Emergency Manager of Flint; it's unclear why he was using a Gmail address as EM.

In the next few days, officials at DEQ exchanged some panicked emails, pretty much blaming Flint for the non-response, noting that DEQ "became peripherally aware" of the spike in Legionnaires, but also bitching about the Genesee County supervisor suggesting that it might be tied to the switch to Flint river water.

Thelen, Mary Beth (DEQ)

From: Wurfel, Brad (DEQ)
Sent: Friday, March 13, 2015 6:49 PM
To: Hollins, Harvey (GOV)
Cc: Wyant, Dan (DEQ)
Subject: Part II
Attachments: FOIA Request Flint Water.doc

Importance: High

OK D-

This is the second issue I mentioned earlier today. In December, our staff became peripherally aware that the hospitals in Genesee were seeing an uptick in Legionnaires cases.

Legionnaires is a water-borne illness. It essentially is a type of pneumonia caused by a bacteria. It is treated with antibiotics. Untreated, it can be deadly. It most often manifests in nursing homes and assisted living facilities, because the transmission is through water vapor getting into lungs – via air conditioners, vaporizers or low-flow shower heads that produce a lot of misting. You can drink water with this bacteria in it and not get sick – it has to enter the lungs in vapor.

I don't have any details on the cases, but here is what I understand to this point:

- More than 40 cases reported since last April. That's a significant uptick – more than all the cases in the last five years or more combined.
- April / May is usually the start of Legionnaires season – it proliferates in warmer months – but April also is the point at which the city switched to the Flint River as a source.

It appears that panicked email was printed out by then DEQ Director Dan Wyant's assistant, Mary Beth Thelen, then initialed by Wyant, presumably indicating he had read it.

Also included on that email, though, was Harvey Hollins.

As I noted here, in December, in response to a recommendation from Governor Snyder's hand-picked Flint Task Force, the governor picked Hollins to be the single "independent" person overseeing response to the Flint crisis. It was absurd to pick him in the first place, because (as this shows) Hollins had been personally involved all along. But he is, at least on paper, in charge of response.

In other words, the email chain shows that both Snyder's hand-picked EM and the guy in charge of liaising with Flint knew, over a year ago, that Legionnaires (which has since killed at least 9 people) might be tied to the water switchover.

Progress Michigan doesn't note how they came by this email. But it's pretty clear it was Wyant's personal copy of it. In December – in response to another suggestion by the Task Force – Snyder had Wyant resign. Since then, Attorney General Bill Schuette pointed to Wyant's resignation (which he originally expressed sadness about) to justify opening up his own investigation into the crisis.

All of which suggests to me that Wyant is unwilling to be the sole scapegoat for this crisis.