

Flint plant boss: State said corrosion controls not needed

Jonathan Oosting and Jim Lynch, The Detroit News 9:05 p.m. EDT March 29, 2016



(Photo: Daniel Mears / Detroit News)

Flint — Water Treatment Plant Supervisor Mike Glasgow told legislators Tuesday he had assumed Flint would have to use corrosion control chemicals when it began drawing water from the Flint River, but was told by the state it was not necessary.

Michigan joint committee hears

testimony on Flint water crisis

The lack of corrosion control chemicals was one of several issues that Glasgow, 2015 memo to a top official in the Snyder administration warning that rushing Flint's water treatment plant into full-time production "could lead to some big potential disasters down the road."

The warning proved prophetic. River water the city began using in April 2014 ended up damaging aging pipes, which leached lead into the city's drinking water supply.

"You can believe I will question some of the decisions of regulators above me in the future," Glasgow said during a meeting of the Joint Select Committee on The Flint Water Public Health Emergency.

The Tuesday event on the campus of the University of Michigan-Flint was the first legislative hearing in which testimony was heard from affected Flint residents. Their complaints ranged from not being consulted on the change to river water to criticism of Gov. Rick Snyder to a lack of lead abatement services for adults.

Flint resident Nic Custer urged state lawmakers to fund additional lead service line replacement, increase water bill reimbursements and help distribute shower filters in a city where many residents still fear to bathe in their water.

"It's really a travesty people have to live through this day in and day out," Custer said. "One day is not enough to show you how hard it is."

Glasgow, in his sworn testimony, said Michigan Department of Environmental Quality district engineer Mike Prysby told him the city would not need to use corrosion controls when it brought the plant online. He later told reporters the corrosion control discussion was part of an in-person conversation about monitoring protocols at the plant.

Glasgow's version of events is bolstered by an Aug. 31, 2015 city email he sent to Howard Croft, Flint's director of public works. In that communication Croft provided to The Detroit News, Glasgow addressed a comment from the DEQ stating the city's corrosion controls were "not optimized" and would require the addition of phosphates.

"We originally had this chemical in the design, but the DEQ did not mandate it from the start," Glasgow wrote in the email. "(They) informed us to wait and see the results of our lead and copper sampling to determine if it was necessary."

The state Department of Environmental Quality offered no contradiction to the testimony. "The department continues to cooperate with internal investigations regarding staff actions in the matter," DEQ spokeswoman Melanie Brown said Tuesday.

Asked by lawmakers about the motivation for his March "disaster" email, Glasgow said he wanted to run the Flint plant for six months prior to switching to river water and asked to double his staff. The plant had 40 employees in 2005 when it was used as a backup source, but 26 when it went into full-time use in 2014, he said.

It wasn't immediately clear how many water plant layoffs occurred prior to the state's emergency management takeover in 2011.

Requests denied over costs

Glasgow told legislators his requests for additional time and resources were rejected by his bosses — Croft and former utilities administrator Duffy Johnson — primarily due to the cost.

"I feel I was shut down to some degree, like my opinion didn't matter. The red flags I flew up were taken for a grain of salt," said Glasgow, who is now the utilities administrator in Flint.

Glasgow, a Flint employee for over a decade, previously worked as a laboratory supervisor from 2005 to May 2015.

He passed the state's F-1 certification program for water treatment and received his license May 6, 2010, according to state records. The license requires five years of relevant experience in a treatment plant, with one of those years operating a plant.

Prior to Glasgow receiving his license, operators from Genesee County would conduct the annual tests of the facility as backup source under a formal memo of understanding.

Former Flint Mayor Dayne Walling told legislators he did not begin to understand the corrosion control issue until spring of 2015.

Walling said the state and its emergency managers left him and other elected officials out of critical decisions that affected the city, including the decision to get drinking water from the Flint River during ongoing construction of a new regional pipeline to Lake Huron.

"This was entirely kept from myself, from city council, from the public," Walling said. "It was apparently inserted into the city's budget, prepared at the very end of June 2013, after the drafts had been shared with myself and with city council and the public which did not include using the Flint River."

On June 26, 2013, two months after Flint agreed to join the Karegnondi Water Authority, then-Emergency Manager Ed Kurtz signed off on a resolution seemingly committing the city to using water from the river and upgrading its plant.

Two days later, in a June 28 memo to then-state Treasurer Andy Dillon, Kurtz said the city was exploring its options for interim water service and said "high consideration is being given to utilizing the Flint River" or blending it with Detroit water.

Resident got 'frantic' call

The hearing came on the heels of a report from Snyder's Flint Water Advisory Task Force, which concluded that the "causes of the crisis lie primarily at the feet of the state by virtue of its agencies' failures and its appointed emergency managers' misjudgments." The state environmental department misinterpreted the federal Lead and Copper Rule when it did not require corrosion control chemicals in the Flint water.

The city previously purchased Lake Huron water from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department that was treated with phosphates, and Glasgow said he thought that practice would continue until Prysby said it was unnecessary.

He began to connect the dots in February 2015, when initial testing at the home of Flint resident LeeAnne Walters revealed unusually high lead levels in her tap water.

Walters, who also testified Tuesday, said she received a "frantic" phone call from Glasgow that month.

"You could hear the panic in his voice telling me not to drink the water," she said. "It was the highest they'd ever seen."

Glasgow told legislators he relied on state regulators for directions on compliance with the Lead and Copper Rule, saying he supports a push to update the rules and bring them "up to speed." He noted the Flint water plant was put into full-time use without the necessary equipment to add corrosion controls, and said it would have taken three to six months to install it.

Earlier in the hearing, Michigan lawmakers scrutinized local officials for their own failures to alert the public to problems.

"Please don't act like your hands are clean," Sen. Joe Hune, R-Hamburg, told Genesee County health officials.

Hune's commentary followed sworn testimony from Genesee County Health Director Mark Valacek and Environmental Health Supervisor Jim Henry, who criticized state agencies for their handling of lead contamination and a spike in deadly Legionnaires' disease that has killed 10 in the county. The Genesee health officials defended their actions.

"There was an unprecedented lack of cooperation by the two departments in state government that should have been our strongest partners," Valacek said. "Had they been public health partners, we could have prevented this catastrophe."

The county "did not fail the city," Valacek told legislators.

Henry said the county first noticed an uptick in Legionnaires' cases in August 2014 but suggested a subsequent request for assistance from the DEQ was rebuffed because the presence of Legionella was not a technical violation of the federal Safe Water Drinking Act.

The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services later prevented the county from working directly with the federal Centers for Disease Control, he said.

Rep. Ed McBroom, R-Vulcan, repeatedly asked Valacek and Henry why they hadn't alerted the public when state and federal agencies did not.

"What would have been the cost to you to say, you know what, the state is wrong, we're going to do a favor to the citizens we work for?" McBroom said.

'We're all poisoned'

During the public comment period, Flint resident Clarissa Mcamez said residents should have been consulted about using Flint River water.

"We'd have said 'hell no,'" she said. "We know of the dead bodies that are found in there regularly. We know of the cars that are dumped in there because of insurance fraud. ... So why would we say, that's where we want to get our water?"

Keri Webber said she was "insulted" by Gov. Rick Snyder's 75-point action plan for Flint because it does not do enough to address adults — not just children — who were exposed to lead-contaminated water.

Webber told legislators that she, her husband and their 16-year-old daughter have all suffered the effects of lead exposure. Her 20-year-old daughter contracted Legionnaires' disease, she said.


"These wraparound services do not exist," Webber said. "We need help, every one of us, and that includes our teens and our adults. We're all poisoned."

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