

Public Health Crisis: Emails Indicate Flint Lead Tests Withheld from Public at Michigan Governor Snyder's Command

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If there was any question as to whether the Snyder administration was more concerned about their public image or public health, this should provide a definitive answer.

Adding to controversy over what top officials knew and when regarding [Flint's water crisis](#) and resulting health epidemic, emails obtained by the *Flint Journal* suggest that Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder told state officials to suppress lead testing results, both from local health officials and the community, while they figured out how to present the information to the public.

The emails, which are from October and November 2015 and were obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, include correspondence by Jim Henry, Genesee County's environmental health supervisor, to county Health Officer Mark Valacak, and correspondence between Henry and Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) Laboratory Director George Krisztian.



Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder, who, according to emails obtained by the Flint Journal, ordered MDEQ to hold on to lead testing results until they figured out how to present the information to the public. (Photo: Michigan Municipal League/flickr/cc)

They "show growing frustration on the county's part as it attempted to obtain information from the DEQ," [the Journal reports](#).

Testing on buildings within the Flint School District began on Oct. 2, and Snyder gave a press conference Oct. 8 admitting that lead levels exceeded federal limits. At one school, Freeman Elementary School, levels were six times higher than federal limits.

From the *Journal*:

"MDEQ explained that the Governor prohibited releasing all Genesee County lead results until after the press conference," wrote Jim Henry, Genesee County's environmental health supervisor.

Henry, in an interview Wednesday, said county officials didn't learn of the test results until they were distributed following a press conference.

“They should have alerted the schools and they didn’t,” Henry said.

Henry and DEQ officials held a meeting Oct. 16, and

[a]ccording to an Oct. 18 email Henry wrote to county Health Officer Mark Valacak summarizing the meeting, DEQ apologized for not releasing school lead results in a timely manner and claimed they were ordered by Snyder to delay the release.

And on Nov. 3 Henry sent an email to Krisztian requesting all testing results for water at Freeman, as further testing had been done there during the end of October, but that request was denied. Krisztian said that the samples from Oct. 24 presented an “incomplete picture of the plumbing system” and that samples taken Oct. 31 would not be available until Nov. 4.

“I am hoping to either have a conference call or a meeting in Flint with all the partners to review the results and discuss how we will present the information to the public,” Krisztian wrote in the email.

If there was any question as to whether the Snyder administration was more concerned about their public image or public health, this should provide a definitive answer.

—Lonnie Scott, Progress MichiganThe governor’s office [responded](#) to the reporting by stating that it “unequivocally denies [the] allegations” that it withheld information.

The statement adds: “On Friday, Oct. 2, the day after learning about elevated lead levels in the city, Snyder responded aggressively with an action plan that included testing the water in the schools and distributing filters.”

However, redacted emails released last month by the governor [indicate](#) that his administration was informed of problems with Flint’s water many months before, as early as Feb. 2015, while those distributed filters [may not be effective enough](#) to bring down lead levels to the safety threshold for some homes.

“If there was any question as to whether the Snyder administration was more concerned about their public image or public health, this should provide a definitive answer,” said Lonnie Scott, executive director of Lansing-based watchdog group Progress Michigan, in response to the new reporting.

“Damage from lead poisoning is irreversible,” Scott added. “Delaying the decision to alert the community to high levels of lead in their water for even a day is too long. The decision to delay the release of critical lead test information is a decision that children and families in Flint will have to live with for the rest of their lives.”

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