

EPA head cites 'significant challenges' for Flint

Jonathan Oosting and Chad Livengood, Detroit News Lansing Bureau 3:02 p.m. EDT June 17, 2016



(Photo: Daniel Mears / The Detroit News)

Lansing — Flint's water distribution system is too large and its treatment plant and administered, Environmental Protection Agency chief Gina McCarthy said Snyder and Flint Mayor Karen Weaver.

While testing shows that Flint's water quality is improving, McCarthy stressed to the long-term goal of reliable and sustainable clean drinking water" as the c treat raw Lake Huron water from the Karegnondi Water Authority.

Flint operators lack the appropriate expertise to run a granular media surface to an EPA-commissioned evaluation by Sleeping Giant Environmental Consul

mistakes "can have a huge impact" on public health.

The plant also has few written operating procedures, an inadequate number of maintenance staff and lacks a formal pre maintenance program, according to the evaluation, which indicates that maintenance priorities "appear to be established

McCarthy said the Weaver administration must ensure the drinking water system can hire rapidly and contract quickly for viability of the system requires a long-term plan for financial support.

"The drinking-water-treatment system must have the people, equipment, management, training and expert support it needs," the EPA chief wrote.

The size of Flint's water distribution system is too large for current and projected water demand in Flint, McCarthy said. "Water resting in pipes too long, "potentially causing a loss of chlorine residual, which is a necessary barrier against pathogens

McCarthy noted the EPA, Flint officials and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality have installed a flushing program to clear stagnant water, "but the state and city will have to determine and implement a solution for the long-term."

The letter and water treatment plant evaluation come as the city continues to weigh whether it will move forward with plans for the new KWA pipeline, which could be operating by spring 2017.

Flint returned to Detroit's Lake Huron water source in October after temporarily switching to the Flint River in April 2014, after the city lost corrosion controls that helped lead to the contamination crisis. Flint, under control of a state-appointed emergency manager, previously operated the plant on a full-time basis.

Weaver said McCarthy's letter confirms what Flint officials have been saying for months: "We not only need new pipes, we need a new water system."

"The water system in the City of Flint is old, antiquated and too large to adequately serve the city's current population, which was designed decades ago when the water system was put in place," the mayor said in a statement. "Our city needs a complete infrastructure overhaul now and in the long term."

The EPA consultants acknowledged their April 25-28 review of the Flint water treatment plant was limited because it was not possible to provide them data on its raw water quality and they could not interview "the person who was responsible for process was in operation," according to the report.

While she said the decision on a long-term drinking water source is up to the city and state, McCarthy noted an EPA permit before making any switch in water source the city must demonstrate that it has the technical, managerial and financial capacity to comply with the Safe Drinking Water Act.

Snyder spokeswoman Anna Heaton said the governor's office is reviewing the letter and will be "working with the city to get EPA.

Heaton noted that the fiscal year 2017 state budget awaiting Snyder's signature includes \$1.5 million for the DEQ to hire consultants to help Flint with water operations, including corrosion control specialists, sampling staff, lab staff and service line verification.

The KWA decision is ultimately up to the city, Heaton said. The Snyder-created Flint Water Interagency Coordination Committee offers options, including continued use of Detroit water or KWA water treated by a new Genesee County plant.

Weaver said the city is dealing with the "aftermath" of state-appointed emergency managers who reduced water plant staff from December 2011 and April 2015.

"Our current employees are getting the job done and administration is actively working to recruit additional experienced people for the posted positions," she said. "But we also need additional resources to pay experienced, qualified people. That's money that we don't have."

The consultant's evaluation of the Flint plant paints a picture of an unorganized facility charged with ensuring 100,000 residents. Flint's municipal water treatment plant staff were "unprepared and ill-equipped" to treat Flint River when the city left Detroit.

"As one would expect with a staff that has limited experience with surface water treatment, there is an apparent lack of understanding of concepts and how those concepts can apply to controlling treatment processes in ways that ensure high quality finished water."

The firm found Flint's water plant has no inventory of its equipment or documentation detailing how old it is and what it was used for. The treatment equipment.

"There is no inventory of critical spare parts, and purchasing policy has limited the acquisition of an appropriate inventory of parts in their report. "There is no formal work order program to prioritize, track, and evaluate the effectiveness of maintenance work."

Water plant staff described Flint's purchasing policy as "cumbersome" and "lengthy," the consultants said.

The EPA's consultants also expressed concern the Flint water plant has far too few employees.

"Staffing is inadequate for water treatment plant maintenance needs, and additional staff are also required for maintenance activities essential for water quality," the consulting firm wrote in its report.

Flint officials last week announced that [the city had installed a new temporary system at the water plant \(/story/news/michigan/flint-water-crisis/2016/06/10/flint-installs-system-increase-chlorine-water/85717970/\)](http://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/michigan/flint-water-crisis/2016/06/10/flint-installs-system-increase-chlorine-water/85717970/) to boost chlorine levels following an EPA warning that warm weather would lead to chlorine decay.

The federal agency had recommended the city install a new pumping system to increase levels of chlorine, which is used to kill disease-causing organisms from developing.

"In a well-performing system, these issues would be anticipated and addressed as a matter of routine, rather than on a case-by-case basis. This urgent action demonstrates, more powerfully than any report can, that there are basic operational deficits for personnel essential to resolve."

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