

Michigan

Top EPA official: 'No reasonable operator' would have used Flint water plant



Robert Kaplan, interim director of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Region 5 office, speaks during a news conference in Flint on Tuesday, April 18, 2017. (Jake May | MLive.com)



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FLINT, MI -- Three years after the state of Michigan licensed the city's aging water plant to treat Flint River water, a top EPA official says the facility should never have been allowed operate in the first place.

"No reasonable plant operator would have given the go-ahead and in fact they didn't," said Robert Kaplan, interim Region 5 director for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "It was a mistake. It was rushed. It was hurried ... It shouldn't have happened."

Speaking after a news conference in Flint City Hall Tuesday, April 18, Kaplan supported the recommendation of Mayor Karen Weaver, who wants the city to purchase pre-treated water as its primary and back-up sources rather than attempt to upgrade and operate the plant with water from the Karegnondi Water Authority.

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Kaplan compared the plant to a broken-down old car and said the closer the inspection, the worse it looks.



State officials, EPA back Flint mayor's plan to stay on Detroit water

Three years ago, they toasted the Flint water treatment plant as a valuable asset that would help free the city from the high cost of Detroit water.

"The initial perception of the plant's viability were not accurate," he said. "When we put pencil to paper, what we found was ... it was more in the order of \$100 million" to make the necessary upgrades.

"It would have been a lot of good money after bad. The idea was to cut the losses and move forward with a better solution."

Kaplan's comments come three years after the state of Michigan licensed the Flint plant to operate despite warnings from the city's plant operator, who said the facility was not in position to produce safe water.

"I have people above me making plans to distribute water ASAP," former Laboratory & Water Quality Supervisor Mike Glasgow said in an email to the state Department of Environmental Quality at the time.



Flint water supervisor warned state of problems before switch to river

Just eight days before the city started using the Flint River as its water source, a treatment plant supervisor warned state regulators of a potential disaster on the horizon.

"I was reluctant before, but after looking at the monitoring schedule and our current staffing, I do not anticipate giving the OK to begin sending water out anytime soon," Glasgow's email said. "If water is distributed from this plant in the next couple weeks, it will be against my direction."

Flint was being run by emergency manager Darnell Earley at the time of Flint's switch from the Detroit water system to using the treatment plant to treat Flint River water.

Appointed by Gov. Rick Snyder to fix the city's finances, Earley projected the temporary use of the plant and the river could save Flint \$5 million.

According to state records, Glasgow sent his warning to three officials at the DEQ, all of whom have since been charged with criminal wrongdoing in relation to the Flint water crisis.



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Glasgow was also charged criminally and accepted a plea agreement in which he agreed to assist special prosecutors in other cases.

Rich Baird, senior advisor to Gov. Rick Snyder, said he could not address why the water plant was issued permits allowing it to operate even though local, state and federal officials said this week that the plant should not be allowed to operate without tens of millions of dollars in upgrades.

"You have to ask the guys that were at the scene. I don't know," Baird said. "I mean, the only thing I've surmised is they thought they could stand it up and treat the water more cheaply without changing the rates and that they would actually use that approach because it cost a lot less to access Flint River water ...," Baird said.

State Department of Natural Resources Director Keith Creagh said the decision to use of the plant to treat river water occurred at a time when other options didn't exist.

"There was not an option to have ... (the Genesee County Drain Commissioner's Office) and the KWA and EPA and DEQ all in the room, saying, what's the best solution going forward," Creagh said.

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