

# The Cost of Contamination

In October, the water contamination crisis in Flint, Mich., came to a head: The city conceded that its scheme to use the Flint River as its water source was a failure, and it decided to reconnect to Detroit's municipal water system for the time being.

The switch to Flint River water was always meant to be temporary—the city plans to join a new regional water authority building a pipeline to Lake Huron. Although this interim measure was meant to save the city money in the long run, the toll on human health turned out to be too great, even in the short term.

According to the New York Times, in September, a researcher from Virginia Tech found elevated lead levels in 300 Flint homes. The Detroit Free Press also reported that pediatrician Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha of the Hurley Medical Center in Flint found that the number of local children with elevated lead levels in their blood grew “from 2.1% in the 20 months prior to Sept. 15, 2013, to 4% between Jan. 1 and Sept. 15 of this year.” In some areas the number had risen to as high as 6.3%. Testing at area schools revealed that three elementary schools' water supplies have lead levels of more than 15 ppb, meaning that officials will need to conduct additional testing and remediation. In the meantime, the schools are supplying students with bottled water so that they do not have to use drinking fountains.

The theory behind the lead contamination is that Flint River water is especially corrosive, and it deteriorated the city's older lead-containing pipe and fixtures. According to the New York



Times, health experts say water from the Detroit system will alleviate this problem because it “is treated with substances that help coat the inside of pipes, which tends to prevent such corrosion.”

The switch back to the Detroit system will come at a cost of \$12 million, and Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder announced a plan to help cash-strapped Flint out: He will ask the state legislature to provide \$6 million toward the effort. Flint will provide \$2 million from its own funds, and local nonprofit organization the C.S. Mott Foundation has pledged to donate \$4 million.

Those whose homes are connected to municipal water rely on their cities and water districts to provide water that is safe for cooking, drinking and bathing. Unfortunately, these water systems are not infallible, and it seems that all too often, contamination—whether from an issue with infrastructure or a problem with source water quality—occurs, resulting in boil water or do not drink alerts.

When these issues occur in your community, residents will be looking for answers, and as water professionals, you are in a position to provide them. Be ready not only to support your current customers with information and equipment, but also put yourself out there as a resource for the community at large.

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