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Michigan Judge Authorizes First Round of Criminal Charges in Flint Water Crisis

Ben Thompson, April 20, 2016

Three Michigan officials will face criminal charges approved by the Genesee County Court on Wednesday, in what is expected to be the first round of an extensive criminal probe into the Flint water crisis.

Flint employee Michael Glasgow, along with Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) employees Steven Busch and Michael Prysby, were charged with a total of 13 combined felony and misdemeanor charges.

Justice Tracy Collier-Nix authorized the charges of evidence tampering and willful neglect of office against Mr. Glasgow, who prosecutors say altered water testing results, MLive reports. Mr. Prysby and Mr. Busch each were charged on several counts, including misconduct in office, tampering with evidence, and Michigan Safe Drinking Water Act violations.

The water emergency began in 2014 when Flint switched its water source from the Detroit water system to the Flint River as a cost saving measure. The river water, which was highly corrosive, went untreated and untested until 2015, despite complaints from residents and was not switched back to Detroit's Lake Huron-sourced water until last October. By that time, the highly corrosive water had caused lead to leach out of the pipes and flow from residents' taps.

A state of emergency has been in place in Flint since December, and residents still wary of contamination are using filters or drinking bottled water.

While the crisis raised awareness of potentially contaminated water in United States, to some it also displayed the "limits in running a government as a business," as University of California in San Diego political science professor Thad Kousser told The Christian Science Monitor earlier this year.

"The private marketplace works because of competition, but governments often have monopoly," he said. "When Volkswagen screws up, you can buy a Ford. But when lead starts coming out of your tap, you can't just turn on another tap."

Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette's office says Prysby and Busch knowingly misled the Environmental Protection Agency, telling agency officials that the city was using corrosion control when both were aware that it was not. They are also accused of tampering with water tests and hampering a Genesee County Health Department investigation.

Busch is on paid leave following a suspension, while Prysby is working a new DEQ job. Glasgow also testified that Prysby informed him that phosphate would not be needed to treat Flint's potentially corrosive piping.

The Detroit News reported that Attorney General Schuette's action was "the first of more to come." Schuette, along with other investigators and officials, is set to make a "significant" announcement in Flint Wednesday afternoon.

Material from The Associated Press was used in this report.