

ENVIRONMENTALISTS

FOR BERNIE

Flint just one example of need to upgrade water supply **Bernie Sanders and Erin Brockovich for the *Detroit Free Press*, 2/13/16**

Flint is experiencing a disaster — and there isn't anything “natural” about the circumstances that have left the city's drinking water poisoned with lead.

The situation in Flint is what happens when public officials who, in their reckless zeal to slash government spending, jeopardize the health and well-being of the residents they are entrusted with keeping safe.

In April 2014, Flint's water supply was switched from Detroit's system to its own system using Flint River water — notoriously a dumping ground for industry. The move was a temporary change until the city joined a new regional water system. The switch took place when the city was under the control of state-appointed emergency manager.

Since the switch, residents complained of rashes, foul-smelling water and brown water. The city's plan, approved by the state's department of environmental quality, failed to treat Flint River water to keep lead from the city's infrastructure from leaching into drinking water. State officials ignored resident complaints and some tried to hide the health threat from Flint residents.

Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha helped bring the problem to the public's attention after state agencies dismissed her concerns. A practicing pediatrician in Flint, Hanna-Attisha believes all of the city's 8,657 children under six years old should be treated as if they were exposed to lead.

Flint is a wake-up call to the fragile nature of our public water supply, but unfortunately, Flint is not alone.

While these types of crises tend to affect poor and minority communities disproportionately, they do impact families across the socioeconomic divide. The deteriorating state of our municipal water systems represents a clear and present danger to the health and welfare of all Americans. Everyone is vulnerable.

For three years, water in Hannibal, Mo., has tested positive for high levels of a chemical byproduct found to harm the liver, kidneys, and central nervous system with long-term exposure. The water in Gardena, Calif., turned brown and green last year. Just this month, the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals deemed the water in St. Joseph Parish safe to drink, despite reports of dark brown water with a gritty-looking residue.

The list goes on.

How can it be that in 2016, millions of Americans wonder whether the water coming from their faucets is making them sick, or worse?

We recognize that the EPA is staffed by thousands of well-intentioned public servants. However, we also know that the agency is underfunded, understaffed and lacking in true enforcement power. Indeed, last year EPA mis-stepped in the case of Flint and did not alert state leaders or others when it learned of Flint's water issues.

In 2016 it is unimaginable that thousands, perhaps millions, of Americans are facing a scenario where the water coming from their home faucet is hazardous to their health. This is unacceptable and we must act decisively. The EPA needs an overhaul to act in the interests of the American people.

As a nation, we have become obsessed with economic austerity policies and a laissez-faire approach to governing. Not only do we allow corporations to pollute our waterways, but the government has failed to keep up with critically needed improvements to our drinking water and wastewater infrastructure. That has got to change.

We must upgrade the treatment plants that provide safe drinking water and protect our nation's rivers and lakes. We cannot rely on stop-gap remedies to solve our water issues. The use of chloramines, a combination of chlorine and ammonia to treat water, and other money-saving tricks have no place in our drinking-water rules.

We must commit to making environmental justice a national priority. Poor communities and communities of color, like Flint, are often the hardest hit by pollution from power plants, incinerators, chemical waste and lead contamination from old pipes and paint.

Perhaps most of all, the federal government must work for ordinary people, and not just the largest corporations that contribute unlimited amounts of money to fund political campaigns.