

Official didn't publicly report Flint-area disease outbreak

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DETROIT (AP) — Michigan's former state epidemiologist acknowledged in a plea deal Wednesday that she was aware of dozens of cases of Legionnaires' disease in the Flint area around the same time the city changed its water source, but that she didn't report it to the general public.

Corrine Miller, the former director of disease control and prevention at the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, faced three charges stemming from the investigation into Flint's lead-contaminated water crisis. She pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor of willful neglect of duty in exchange for prosecutors dropping felony misconduct and conspiracy charges.

A no-contest plea isn't an admission of guilt but is treated that way for sentencing. Miller's attorney, Kristen Guinn, said Miller entered the plea because of potential civil actions.

Flint, a financially struggling city of 100,000 people, switched from Detroit's water system to the Flint River to save money in 2014. But tests later showed that the river water was improperly treated and coursed through aging pipes and fixtures, releasing toxic lead.

The plea agreement states that Miller was aware of the Legionnaires' cases in 2014, and reported to someone identified only as "Suspect 2" that the outbreak "was related to the switch in the water source" after compiling data about the illness in Genesee County, where Flint is located. No explanation is given in the plea deal as to why the cases weren't publicly reported.

A definitive connection between the corrosive river water and Legionnaires' has not been made, but many experts believe it likely was the cause. At least 91 Legionnaires' cases were detected in the Flint area in 2014 and 2015, including 12 deaths.

Legionnaires' disease is a type of pneumonia caused by bacteria that thrive in warm water and infect the lungs. People can get sick if they inhale mist or vapor from contaminated water, but the bacteria don't spread from person to person. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that between 8,000 and 18,000 people are hospitalized with the disease each year.

Flint's water crisis was preceded by E. coli detections; resident complaints about color, odor and taste; and high levels of a disinfectant byproduct. A General Motors plant had stopped using the water just six months after the 2014 switch because it was rusting engine parts.

A total of nine people have been charged as part of the investigation into the water crisis. Miller was among eight state workers charged, while one city worker — former Flint Utilities Administrator Mike Glasgow — pleaded no contest to neglect in May.

Also on Wednesday, the Michigan appeals court agreed to hear a dispute between the state health department and authorities who are investigating crimes stemming from the water crisis. Gov. Rick Snyder is challenging an order by a judge that prohibits McLaren Hospital and Genesee County's health department from talking to the state about new cases of Legionnaires' disease.

The attorney general's office said orders barring contact with the state health department are necessary to protect its investigation. Spokeswoman Andrea Bitely said public health is not at risk.

Associated Press writer Ed White contributed to this report from Detroit.