

U.S.

For Some Living With Flint Water Crisis, Obama Visit Is Overdue

By JULIE BOSMAN and MICHAEL D. SHEAR MAY 4, 2016

FLINT, Mich. — Valerie Smith paused from taking orders at Spectacular Spudz at the Flint Farmers' Market on Tuesday to recall the moment she heard President Obama was going to visit.

"I was like, 'Obama's coming?'" she said, cracking a smile. "That's great. Bring a check."

When he lands in Flint on Wednesday, the president will be greeted with genuine good will from many people here who, like Ms. Smith, voted for him twice and consider themselves supporters.

But mixed with the affection are misgivings. Many Flint residents say that the federal Environmental Protection Agency shares the blame for failing to forcefully intervene early in the city's water crisis, even after receiving complaints in 2014 that the water was foul and discolored.

In the seventh month since officials acknowledged the crisis, with unfiltered water still unsafe to drink, many residents are also impatient that more federal aid has not made its way to Flint so that the lead pipes that contributed to the contamination can be replaced.

Some also wonder why Mr. Obama waited so long before visiting. Other federal officials, and both Democratic presidential candidates, have been to Flint in recent months.

"It's a little too late," Jimmie Stephen, a truck driver, said as he walked down Saginaw Street in downtown Flint on Tuesday. "The E.P.A. had a job to do, and they ignored it. None of the politicians have helped us. I think the community is just going to have to band together to resolve our problems."

Mr. Obama has been under pressure for months to visit Flint. White House aides said he had decided to make the trip after receiving a letter from an 8-year-old girl.

"I am one of the children that is affected by this water, and I've been doing my best to march in protest and to speak out for all the kids that live here in Flint," the girl, Amariyanna Copeny, wrote to Mr. Obama in March.

Mr. Obama wrote back late last month. "I want to make sure that people like you and your family are receiving the help you need and deserve," his letter said.

White House officials said Mr. Obama would point out to residents that the federal government has provided 7.3 million liters of water and 55,000 water filters. Josh Earnest, the White House press secretary, said this week that federal agencies were providing a "significant expansion" in health care services to Flint.

Members of the president's cabinet, including Gina McCarthy, the administrator of the E.P.A., have already visited. Cecilia Muñoz, the president's top domestic policy adviser, was in Flint on Tuesday to discuss the crisis with residents and local officials.

But critics said the federal government had been conspicuously absent during the crucial months before the crisis was declared, when residents were drinking the lead-tainted water, and state and local officials were largely brushing off their concerns.

Emails from last summer, which were among thousands of pages of messages and documents released this

year, show a lack of alarm about the water crisis on the part of some officials at the E.P.A. Susan Hedman, a regional administrator for the agency, **resigned** in January, and Ms. McCarthy withstood **withering attacks** by Republicans during a House Oversight Committee hearing about the agency's failure to step in. She had argued that states have primary responsibility for **water safety**.

In a June 2015 report, Miguel Del Toral, a scientist for the E.P.A., pointed out gaping problems with Flint's methods of testing lead in water, sky-high levels of lead in one Flint home, and a lack of corrosion control in the water.

Two weeks after he wrote the report, Mr. Del Toral complained in an email on July 8 that he was being marginalized for sounding that alarm. "It almost sounds like I'm to be stuck in a corner holding up a potted plant because of Flint," he wrote.

Other emails released last week show that the agency's regional office in Chicago was receiving complaints from Flint residents in 2014, months after the city switched from Lake Huron water to water from the Flint River.

Savannah Young, a Flint resident, sent an email to the E.P.A. in September 2014 that described her water in blunt terms. "My Flint City tap water is brown," she wrote. "It cannot possibly be safe to drink. No person is available to discuss this issue with me, even after already having three boil water advisories in less than two months time."

Mr. Earnest said that as president, Mr. Obama "takes responsibility for lots of things." But he dismissed the idea that the president would offer an apology to Flint's residents when he meets with several of them on Wednesday. Mr. Earnest cited the findings of a commission set up by Michigan's Republican governor, which placed "primary responsibility" for the water crisis on the state-run environmental agency.

Instead, Mr. Obama is likely to use his visit to Flint as an opportunity to pressure Republicans in Congress to support billions of dollars in improvements to infrastructure around the country. Aides said he would insist that crises like the one in Flint could be prevented with the right investments.

The president may also tweak Republicans in Congress, and some of the party's presidential candidates, who have suggested deep cuts to federal environmental programs.

While in Flint, Mr. Obama is scheduled to receive a briefing from state and local officials, including Gov. Rick Snyder, who has borne the brunt of the blame for the crisis. Mr. Snyder **requested the meeting**, he said on Monday.

Mr. Obama will also sit down privately with a small group of Flint residents and then deliver remarks before heading back to Washington.

At Northwestern High School on the northern edge of Flint on Tuesday, a worker carefully added bright green letters to the school's marquee to spell out "Welcome **President Obama**."

Jim Ananich, a Democratic state senator whose district includes Flint, said in an email that he hoped Mr. Obama's visit would lead to a renewed sense of urgency around Flint's water issues.

"The E.P.A. should have taken over as soon as it was apparent that Governor Snyder's emergency managers and D.E.Q. were completely incapable of protecting the public health," he said, using an abbreviation for the state's Department of Environmental Quality. "But my neighbors and I understand that the administration is stepping up to do what it can, even while the state response continues to flounder."

Some Flint residents said they were exhausted and hopeful that they would soon be able to return to a normal way of life. Many people are still making twice-weekly treks to fire stations to pick up cases of bottled water, which they use for drinking, washing dishes and brushing their teeth.

Jackie Anderson, a probation officer who lives in Flint, said that she wished Mr. Obama had visited months ago, but that she believed his trip would raise the city's spirits.

“I think on a wide level, it’ll be good for the city to see that he’s supportive of us,” she said. “I want to hear what he’s going to do that will make a big difference.”

Julie Bosman reported from Flint, and Michael D. Shear from Washington.