

Host: Robert Frederick

Who do you trust? The government? Scientists? Fellow citizens?

**Speaker: LeeAnne Walters**

My water was two-and-a-half times that of hazardous waste and they were still saying there was not a problem.

Host: Robert Frederick

On this episode of The Conjectural, monitoring our water and environment and the increasingly important role of citizen scientists. I'm Robert Frederick.

You probably already know some of LeeAnne Walters' story. She's a resident of Flint, Michigan, who was not persuaded that everything was fine with her water.

Speaker: LeeAnne Walters

Puzzle pieces of what was happening to my family — trying to put it all together: rashes, hair loss, my kids getting sick, at one point my 14-year old, them telling us they thought he had cancer because they couldn't figure out what was wrong with him, missing a month of school.

Host: Robert Frederick

That was three years ago. The problem, as you probably know, was lead. What you may not know:

Speaker: LeeAnne Walters

I blame the journalists to a certain extent, and then I cut them some slack because they were being lied to just like everybody else, okay? So they get a little bit of a pass there. Because you're being told by the state and all these tests that everything's good, and you're getting told that all these citizens are crazy. So what do you do as a journalist? None of the media in Flint would tell the side of the citizens because the city and the state were saying everything was okay — we were just crazy. Nobody would hear us. They wouldn't put it out.

Host: Robert Frederick

Walters' son was diagnosed with lead poisoning. But the Environmental Protection Agency was doing tests at her house with the results showing lead levels were non-threatening. That got Walters interested in how the science was done herself. She learned from talking with EPA personnel and independent scientists that there was more than one way to test for lead. Different tests showed different results. Outside journalists started paying attention, and a leaked report from the EPA really broke open the story.

Speaker: LeeAnne Walters

And I was told by the state I needed to calm down. It's just a few IQ points — it's not the end of the world. Yes, I'll never forget that day. That's when I decided, that's when I really got in to my research. And so I started testing with Virginia Tech, and from the testing without loopholes, my water was two-and-a-half times that of hazardous waste, and they were still saying there was not a problem.

Host: Robert Frederick

Siddhartha Roy is a graduate student at Virginia Tech and the communications director for the Flint Water Study that independently confirmed that Flint residents were being poisoned with lead in their water.

Speaker: Siddharta Roy

I did a comparison on media reports on Flint before our team got involved. It's actually sad because for the entire year before, the media did like 10 stories a month, and every time it would be the citizens are protesting, you know, they seem angry, but the state said everything was fine. The journalists never questioned the authority; they never questioned the experts. And this is something we need to be very careful about because the rise of scientific misconduct at government agencies that we witnessed in Flint, in D.C., and elsewhere is really concerning. And after we got involved, now there was scientific evidence — boom! — I mean there were like 10-15 stories a day.

**Host: Robert Frederick**

Curt Guyette was that outside reporter who first paid attention. He wasn't in a traditional reporter's role, however.

Speaker: Curt Guyette

I was pretty much throughout my career kind of just a general assignment reporter. In 2013, in November of 2013, I started working for the ACLU of Michigan through a grant from the Ford Foundation. They hired me to write about issues connected to Michigan's Emergency Management Law. Democracy was taken away from Flint and seven other cities in Michigan under what's called Emergency Management Law, where cities, school districts, counties — in financial distress — could be taken over by the state with an appointed emergency manager who has complete authority. The power of elected officials is taken away: they have zero authority. All the power lies in the hands of these appointed city managers.

Host: Robert Frederick

And that power concentration contributed in a major way to the problem because financial austerity was the reason for switching over Flint's water supply to the Flint River in the first place — that was the start of the lead poisoning problem.

Speaker: LeeAnne Walters

I want people to realize, Flint is not fixed. We have not gotten the help that we need. They never declared us a "Natural disaster," we're a man-made so it doesn't qualify us for any of those benefits. Our water still isn't safe. And here we are — what — three years later? And this is where we are.

Host: Robert Frederick

While Flint's drinking water is now in compliance with federal regulations, it may still be a year or more before it is safe for residents to drink it. That's because lead-tainted pipes need to be replaced. Flint, of course, is not the only city with lead pipes. Again, Siddhartha Roy.

Speaker: Siddharta Roy

The fact is we are stuck with anywhere from 6-10 million lead pipes in this country, which is virtually in every major city — so Philadelphia, New Orleans, Washington D.C., Detroit, Boston, Pittsburgh — you name it. And that is exactly why after Flint all of the investigative journalism that has come up is finding lead everywhere. 90 percent of schools in this country are not required to test for lead by the law. Plus, you add to the fact that you have a toothless lead-and-copper rule, where the focus is always on meeting regulation and not on public health, because if you fail — if you are not in compliance — you have to put in millions of dollars, replace these pipes, do a lot of corrosion control, and, most importantly, tell people that their water is not safe to drink. 21st

century America and you will have to tell your people that, “Well, you are an American citizen, but the water you are drinking — that’s coming out of your tap — is not safe to drink.” And some estimates report that 1 in 3 Americans is at some risk of getting lead from drinking water, so that gives you a sense of the issue.



Speaker: LeeAnne Walters

So what do you do as a journalist?

Host: Robert Frederick

Again, Flint resident LeeAnne Walters

Speaker: LeeAnne Walters

Do you believe the tests? Or do you decide to start digging deeper? And we need more of that true, honest, investigative journalism and for people to realize that yeah, there are some crazies, but not everybody’s crazy. And when people are holding up bottles of brown water and bags of hair, maybe you need to take it a little more seriously. That’s how we fix it.

Host: Robert Frederick

And we fix it by taking actions ourselves — being citizen scientists like Walters. Because if the Flint water crisis can happen under a fully staffed Environmental Protection Agency, what will happen under the Trump Administration’s EPA is anybody’s guess. Trump’s transition team laid out a plan to reduce the EPA’s staff by two-thirds. So it’s time for us to come together as communities and contact independent, certified labs to test the water going into our neighborhoods, to test the water going into our businesses, to test the water going to our local schools.

You’ve been listening to The Conjectural. Thanks to LeeAnne Walters, Siddhartha Roy, Curt Guyette, and to the Council for the Advancement of Science Writing for hosting their talk. I look forward to your feedback to TheConjectural.com, where you can also give the support that makes this show happen, download a transcript, and subscribe. I’m Robert Frederick. Follow me on Twitter [@TheConjectural](https://twitter.com/TheConjectural). Thanks for joining us!