

Missouri taps North Carolina health chief facing criticism

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JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) - Missouri Gov. Eric Greitens' pick for health department director has been embroiled in controversy in his home state of North Carolina for nearly a year since reversing earlier warnings to water-well owners that a cancer-causing chemical made their water risky to drink.

Dr. Randall Williams, who was appointed Thursday by Greitens to be the director of Missouri's Department of Health and Senior Services, disputes claims by a veteran toxicologist who accused him of unethically downplaying the toxicity of drinking water in 2016. Williams said the standards used to determine water toxicity were too strict. Williams served as North Carolina's state health director for 1 ½ years starting in 2015.

Before his appointment that year, North Carolina scientists issued a warning to more than 300 households near a Duke Energy coal plant against drinking their well water, saying it contained a toxic chemical known to cause cancer. Hexavalent chromium is found in coal ash, but it's never been proved it entered groundwater from nearby pits used to store coal ash. Williams and North Carolina health officials reversed the warning in 2016, adopting Duke Energy's view that the warning was too cautious about chemical levels.

Greitens' Spokesman Parker Briden said the governor was aware of the allegations but still supports Williams.

The Associated Press last year obtained a copy of toxicologist Ken Rudo's sworn testimony in a lawsuit filed by several environmental groups against Duke Energy. In it, Rudo testifies that his office in the health department was pressured to release false and misleading information to people living near the plant. He also accused Williams of acting unethically.

"The state health director's job is to protect public health," Rudo said in the testimony. "And in this specific instance, the opposite occurred. (Williams) knowingly told people that their water was safe when we knew it wasn't."

The controversy also prompted the resignation of the state epidemiologist, Megan Davies. In her resignation letter, she said that the North Carolina health department's leadership, and Williams, provided the public with false information. "I cannot work for a Department and an Administration that deliberately misleads the public," she said.

Davies declined to comment Thursday when contacted by telephone by The Associated Press.

Briden cited a study from Duke University that found that hexavalent chromium, the toxic chemical said to be contaminating the water, is more related to volcanic rock found in the area than the ash pits. But Duke University professor Avner Vengosh, who did research for the study, told The Associated Press in October that the proximity of the coal pits to the water was still "on the table" as a possible factor in water contamination.

In a release announcing Williams' appointment, Greitens touted the former doctor's work as a physician in combat zones in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Haiti. In North Carolina, Williams also worked on fighting opioid addiction and the Zika virus, Greitens said.

Williams "is an exceptional leader who will put the people of Missouri first," Greitens said in a Facebook post announcing the appointment.

Williams' appointment is subject to confirmation by the Missouri Senate.

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