

Wisconsin power plant spills coal ash into Lake Michigan

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On October 31, a dam at the We Energies Oak Creek Power Plant in Wisconsin collapsed, sending an estimated 2,500 cubic yards of coal ash into Lake Michigan.

Coal ash is a residue produced by the combustion of coal. Prior to regulations put in place since the 1970s, this waste product was released into the atmosphere. Under current regulation, companies are required to capture the material using electrostatic precipitators, whereafter it is stored in holding ponds, disposed of in landfills, reused to manufacture concrete, or diluted and released.

Coal ash often contains substances harmful to humans including cadmium, arsenic, lead and dioxin. It is not classified as toxic waste under existing environmental protection laws.

Responding to the accident on Friday, Barry McNulty, a spokesman for We Energies, told Michigan Radio, “I don’t view it as a particular hazard. It’s not something obviously we want in Lake Michigan but it is not something that is a hazard to human health and the like.”

Many of these same substances are found in Great Lakes fish and wild game, a legacy of over a century of industrial pollutants in water systems. Currently, the state of Michigan recommends minimum levels of fish consumption, with women of child-bearing age and children limited to one meal of fish per month. Even the release of a small amount of a particular toxin may find its way into human food sources through a process called biomagnification, whereby a toxin moves up the food chain and becomes concentrated in the fatty tissues of larger organisms, such as salmon, trout, or other game fish.

The Oak Creek Plant, 20 miles south of Milwaukee, has been in operation since 1959 and uses

approximately 5,000 to 10,000 tons of coal per day. The coal ash that spilled into the lake Monday was from a containment pond that held ash from mid-twentieth century energy production. Some reports have also indicated that the levee used to contain the coal ash waste was partially constructed of fill dirt and leftover coal ash. In 2009, We Energies began supplying residents near the Oak Creek Plant with bottled water when high levels of molybdenum were discovered in residential well water.

The accident in Wisconsin comes six months after the US House of Representatives passed a measure seeking to block the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) from regulating coal ash as toxic waste, instead transferring that responsibility to states. The EPA sought to tighten regulation of the substance after a massive 2008 spill in Kingston, Tennessee, dumped 5.4 million cubic yards of coal ash into an adjacent waterway.

Transferring the responsibility of classifying and monitoring coal ash disposal to individual states is being pursued as federal support for social and environmental programming is slashed. Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker’s two-year budget, which was passed in June, originally contained major cuts to water protection programs. Though the cuts were scaled back by the Joint Finance Committee after enormous public outcry, the general trend, on both federal and state levels, is toward a dismantling of any regulations that might inhibit profit, be they environmental, workplace safety, or otherwise.

State-level control of coal ash disposal would also likely be less stringent than federal regulation and would hobble any effort to contain the effects of a major coal ash spill. Environmental disasters involving plumes of industrial chemicals, such as this week’s

Oak Creek Plant spill, do not respect political boundaries. Mounting a concerted, swift response would require a centralized planning body capable of mitigating the effects of such a disaster.

In an interview on November 3, Joel Brammeier, president of the Chicago-based Alliance for the Great Lakes remarked, “We know coal ash contains toxic substances. The Great Lakes region is still digging out from a legacy of contamination that’s 100 years long. We shouldn’t tie the hands of agencies that are working to protect the lakes.”

Officials from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and other local and federal agencies said last week that they did not expect the ash to spread to other parts of Lake Michigan, and no municipal water intake pipes from the city of Milwaukee were affected.

The accident highlights the extreme vulnerability of the Great Lakes watershed, one of the world’s largest sources of freshwater and home to more than 54 million people. With approximately 26 coal-burning power plants on the Lake Michigan shoreline alone, the potential for future disaster is enormous.



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