

Extensive coal ash contamination found in US water supply

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Recent data released by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) show that as many as 197 different sites across 37 states registered violations to federal drinking water statutes due to contamination from coal ash produced by power plants nearby.

Coal ash impoundment sites, called wet ash ponds, in some cases contained contaminant levels so toxic that in an event of a pond's overflowing, the result would be a loss of human life. Nearby lakes and rivers, which are used by energy companies as a water source for cooling towers, are likewise heavily polluted.

The process of coal-burning in more than 430 different power plants across the US creates more than 140 million tons of ash per year—carrying toxins such as arsenic, lead and mercury which can settle in public areas and water supplies. More than half of the waste is simply stored in landfills, ponds and old mines, where leakage is common. Some 2,000 dump sites hold coal ash across the country.

The impact on human and environmental health can be devastating. The toxin arsenic alone is connected to several forms of cancer in humans as well as heart and lung disease.

In Zekiah Swamp, a tributary of the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland, more than 8.4 million tons of coal ash was found to be leaking into the ground water. The Moapa River Reservation, home to the Paiute Indian tribe in Nevada, has had 136 drinking water violations since 2010, and two in every three children living closest to the landfills nearby have asthma.

The EPA rated 45 ponds “high hazard,” meaning that if a rupture occurred, people would most likely die.

Separate water tests by North Carolina's Duke University found several cases across the state where levels of contamination far exceeded EPA safe water standards. Some of the worst contaminated samples

were drawn from primary sources of drinking water for metropolitan areas.

Mountain Island Lake, which provides water for the city of Charlotte and surrounding suburbs, contained levels of arsenic 25 times higher than the current EPA standards. Duke Energy's Riverbend Steam Station and two coal ash ponds are situated near the lake. The findings were published in the October edition of the journal *Environmental Science & Technology*.

In the past month, environmental organizations have sued 14 power plants in North Carolina and four others in Illinois over the findings.

The EPA proposed in 1978 that coal ash be regulated as a “hazardous waste.” The designation of the substance as hazardous waste would place coal-burning companies under tougher restrictions, including a requirement that companies truck the substance off of the mining grounds and place the material in its own specially-designed landfill.

In 2008, the Tennessee Valley Authority's Kingston dam leaked over 1 billion gallons of toxic sludge across 300 acres of residential and farm properties. The Kingston disaster was the largest spill of coal ash in US history. After the spill, politicians pledged to enact strict regulations. Since then, however, nothing has been done in order to tighten rules for disposing of the ash.

The Obama administration has cut funding to its environmental safety programs and pursued a policy of deregulation. Last February, the White House announced it would cut over \$105 million from the EPA's funding, cuts which would have gone directly towards the department's ability to address contamination of this sort.

The recent EPA findings have been met with silence on the part of both presidential candidates. Indeed, both

Obama and his Republican rival Mitt Romney have repeatedly stressed their support for the coal industry.

The EPA itself has delayed issuing a rule on the pollution. Eric Schaeffer, director of the Environmental Integrity Project, told the *Washington Post* on October 14 that the Obama administration was deliberately stalling to avoid angering the industry. “The reason they’re not acting on the coal ash rule is politics,” he said. “They don’t want any more rules on coal before the election. It’s as simple as that.”

The author also recommends:

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