

Alarming levels of toxins leaking into US groundwater from coal ash ponds

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6 March 2019

A report released Monday by the Environmental Integrity Project (EIP) and Earth Justice revealed that 91 per cent of the 250 coal-powered power plants in the US have leaked toxic chemicals into local groundwater. The chemicals are leaked by way of ponds and landfills holding coal waste from the power plants.

The report found elevated levels of arsenic, lithium, and chromium in nearby groundwater and were “far higher” than the acceptable limits, or Maximum Contaminant Levels (MCLs), set by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). In some cases, toxin levels were hundreds of times above the EPA’s thresholds.

The report is based on publicly available data on the toxicity levels of coal ash dumps. In 2015, the EPA finalized the first federal regulation for the disposal of coal ash, known as the Coal Ash Disposal Regulations. The regulation established groundwater monitoring requirements for coal ash dumps and required power companies to make the data available to the public beginning in March 2018.

Coal ash contains dangerous toxins which are known to cause serious health problems, including cancer and kidney and liver damage. When coal ash seeps into groundwater, it can contaminate the drinking water of all those who live nearby.

The regulation was implemented in the final years of the Obama Administration with language for corrective action which is deliberately vague: “if a constituent of concern is detected above a statistically significant level, that the groundwater protection standard must be set at either the Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) or at the background concentration.”

No timelines or procedures are outlined for the cleanup of these highly-contaminated sites, nor is there any indication that fines will be levied against perpetrators. The regulation is written in the interests of

the multibillion-dollar coal and coal-power industries.

It is highly unlikely that the Trump administration will do anything to enforce the very loose terms of the regulation. In June 2018, the Trump administration’s EPA decided to effectively gut the enforcement of a law passed in 2016 requiring it to evaluate hundreds of toxic chemicals.

The EPA itself did not comment specifically on Monday’s report, only saying that it was reviewing it. EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler is himself a former coal lobbyist and former Special Assistant in EPA’s Pollution Prevention and Toxics office under the George H.W. Bush administration. Appointed acting administrator in July 2018, after former Administrator Scott Pruitt stepped down, and finally approved by Congress in February, Wheeler has promised to roll back environmental protections, including determining that it was no longer necessary to regulate mercury emissions from power plants.

The groundwork for the reactionary environmental policies of the Trump administration was laid by the Obama administration. In 2010, Obama’s Office of Management and Budget (OMB) attempted to block the EPA’s proposal to designate coal ash as toxic waste. In 2012, extensive coal ash contamination was found in US water supply after the Obama White House announced that it would cut \$105 million from the EPA’s funding, and returned no comment on the report after it was released.

The recent EIP report points to another corporate concession in the EPA’s very minimal regulation. The Coal Ash Rule does not regulate older, closed coal ash dumps, although these dumps also contaminate groundwater. According to the report, hundreds of these older ash dumps dot the country, and most coal plants have a mix of both regulated and unregulated ash

dumps on their property.

The report found 10 sites across the US to be heavily contaminated by toxins found in coal ash. Many of these sites are near major metropolitan areas:

* One hour south of San Antonio, Texas beside the San Miguel Power Plant, the groundwater beneath a family ranch is contaminated with at least 12 pollutants at concentrations more than 100 times above MCLs, including cadmium (a probable carcinogen, according to EPA) and lithium (which can cause nerve damage).

* An hour northwest of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, at the New Castle Generating Station, levels of arsenic in the groundwater near the plant's coal ash dump were found to be 372 times MCLs for drinking.

* Southwest of Memphis, Tennessee, near the Mississippi River, the TVA Allen Fossil Plant has leaked arsenic into the groundwater at 350 times above MCLs and lead at four times above, which threatens the Memphis drinking water supply.

* 19 miles southeast of Washington, D.C., ash from three coal plants has contaminated groundwater with unsafe levels of at least eight pollutants at the Brandywine landfill in Prince George's County, Maryland, including lithium at more than 200 times above MCLs and molybdenum (which causes kidney and liver damage) at more than 100 times.

* South of Salt Lake City, Utah, the Hunter Power plant has contaminated the groundwater with lithium at concentrations 228 times MCLs and cobalt at 26 times.

* The Ghent Generating Station, northeast of Louisville, Kentucky, has leaked lithium into the groundwater at 154 times above MCLs and radium at 31 times.

The EPA's limits for MCLs are already generous. That any levels of these toxic substances are considered "acceptable" in soil or drinking water is a major cause for concern. The EPA's MCLs for toxic compounds found in coal ash include 10 micrograms/L for arsenic (a known carcinogen), 5 micrograms/L for cadmium, 3 milligrams/L for boron and 0.05 milligrams/L for selenium.

The recent history of the crisis of toxic contamination in the United States points to the bankruptcy of the Democratic Party and the pseudo-left environmentalists who serve to prop them up politically. The Democrats, no less than the Republicans, have served the interests of the corporations who continue to pollute the planet

for profits. Nothing but minimal regulations are introduced, which can be stripped away or averted when business demands it, while budgets are cut to prevent them from being enforced.

The working class suffers the most from the leaking of toxic substances into the water supply. In Kentucky and Flint, Michigan, workers have spoken out against the years of environmental abuse by the corporations, aided and abetted by both Republicans and Democrats, that have left thousands of workers without clean water. Coal miners in the US and throughout the world face serious threats to their health, such as black lung disease, because of the cost-cutting strategies of the corporations to produce more and more profit in the face of growing competition.

The fight for the basic right to clean water and an environment free of chemical pollutants raises fundamental political questions. These basic rights will not be guaranteed under a system in which the corporations get to make the decisions that affect the lives of the vast majority of the population based on their own profit interests. These corporations are allowed to pollute the earth with the help of the two main political parties in the United States. Workers must understand that these parties are their class enemies and will never fight for their demands for a clean environment.

A socialist solution is needed to the crisis. Workers in the energy industry across the country must form rank-and-file committees to take their industry into their own hands and out of the hands of the global corporations, and reach out to workers worldwide to advance their struggle. The energy industry must be democratically controlled, based on fulfilling the interests of the international working class, not the profits of the corporate oligarchs.



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