

Contaminated Wood River: A look at the report on Illinois coal ash ponds

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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EAST ALTON – A group of non-profit environmental watchdogs have released a report regarding coal ash pollution in the State of Illinois – and the Riverbend made its list.

The report comes in the wake of utility companies being forced to publicly report groundwater monitoring data on their websites, as required by 2015 federal regulations regarding coal ash. It was created by the Environmental Integrity Project (EIP), Earthjustice, Prairie Rivers Network and the Sierra Club. Its ultimate determination was

that 90 percent – or 22 of 24 – coal-fired power plants in Illinois have groundwater with unsafe levels of at least one toxic pollutant.

In the Riverbend, the former Wood River Power Plant, which was formerly operated by Dynegy – a company with many mentions in the report – has groundwater near its coal ash with six times the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) safe level of arsenic, double the safe amount of sulfate, nine times the safe level of molybdenum and as much as 23 times the the safe levels for boron.

But what do these chemicals mean to the nearby wetlands, major river and communities?

According to the report, arsenic, which is a known human toxin causing death in too high concentrations, can cause multiple types of cancer, neurological damage and “other health effects.” Boron is a threat to those still developing. It poses developmental risks to humans, including low birth weights, and can result in stunted growth. It can also result in plant toxicity in aquatic ecosystems, the report stated, which is especially dangerous considering the multiple nearby wetlands. Sulfate is a known causer of diarrhea, and molybdenum damages the body's kidneys and liver in too high of concentrations.

At the former site of the Wood River Power Plant, the report states there are at least four coal ash ponds collectively storing more than one and a half million cubic yards of coal ash. Those ponds are located in Alton near both the Mississippi River and Wood River, which is a nearby tributary of the Mississippi. None of the coal ash ponds are lined. The report stated the primary ash bond contains coal ash, is within coal ash and on top of ash. It was built on ash and its berms are made of ash as well.

The report does not state to what extent nearby groundwater is utilized for drinking, but the potential for contamination of the wetlands near the old plant and the proximity of these contaminants to the Mississippi River are both items of concern. Many people who source their water from wells near their homes do not test their water, however, and most likely should if they live near such a facility.

So, what's being done about it?

Dynegy's closure plans for coal ash ponds in Illinois, including the former Wood River Power Plant, are consolidation of the coal ash after removing the water, followed by covering the waste with a “cap.” The report states this practice will be ineffective for coal ash ponds without any sort of lining keeping them from leeching into the groundwater. Therefore, the report reasons, such capping measures will do little to nothing to prevent future contamination of the groundwater.

The site of the former Wood River Power Plant has initiated assessment monitoring around all four of the ash ponds. The corporation plans to close all the ash ponds in place and submitted its closure plan to the EPA in 2016. They are also currently in the process of seeking permits to discharge water from the ponds to close them. According to the report, this will not stop the “ongoing flow of dangerous contamination into groundwater and the Wood River.

A 2018 ruling by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia “significantly changed the relationship between groundwater data and unlined coal ash ponds,” the report stated. More than 90 percent of the ash ponds are unlined. The court held provisions to “continue operating unless and until monitoring reveals that the pond is polluting the groundwater do not adequately protect public health and the environment.” This ruling forces the EPA to “devise a different mechanism to protect against pollution from unlined ash ponds.”

This would mean the EPA would only be able to schedule the closure or retrofit the coal ash ponds with a protective liner.

A possible solution to this problem proposed by the authors of the report would be for the State of Illinois to regulate coal ash contamination at the site level instead of at the level of individual coal ash ponds or landfills. If groundwater does show contamination, like that around the former Wood River Power Plant, the authors suggest the owner of the site should be required to clean it up, regardless of whether or not the site is regulated by the coal ash rule.

“Illinois has the authority to go beyond the requirements of the coal ash rule, and should be required to do so,” the report states. “Failure to address all sources of coal ash will fail to restore groundwater quality.”

The full report can be found here: https://illinoiscoalash.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/capandrun-ilcoalash_web.pdf