



Sierra Club Illinois and Prairie Rivers Network Move to Block Coal Mine Pollution From Being Dumped Into Big Muddy River

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SPRINGFIELD, IL. - Today, Sierra Club Illinois and Prairie Rivers Network announced they are appealing the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA)'s decision to grant a National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit to

Williamson Energy LLC, the owner of the Pond Creek coal mine. The NPDES permit, which was [granted by the IEPA on April 15](#), does not remedy major flaws in the 2019 draft permit, does not protect the environment, and does not adhere to Illinois or federal law. In the appeal, Sierra Club Illinois and Prairie Rivers Network, who is represented by Albert Ettinger and Great Rivers Environmental Law Center, ask the Illinois Pollution Control Board to order the IEPA to reconsider the permit in order to establish conditions necessary to protect the Big Muddy River and other Illinois waters.

The IEPA granted this new NPDES permit to Williamson Energy LLC, which is a subsidiary of companies that emerged from the Murray Energy bankruptcy, despite the company's long history of permit violations. In the newly granted permit, the IEPA declined to even consider placing a proper limit on chloride releases from the Pond Creek coal mine, despite the harmful impact excess chloride can have on wildlife in the river and allowing levels of iron, sulfate, and other pollutants that will harm the environment and potentially public health.

“Despite making some improvements to the original draft permit, the NPDES permit issued by the IEPA still falls short of the critical protection we need for the Big Muddy River and its tributaries,” says Amanda Pankau, Energy Campaign Coordinator with Prairie Rivers Network. “The contaminants allowed in this permit are harmful to aquatic life, and overall the permit fails to adequately mitigate the impacts this dirty mine water will have on local waters, wildlife, and communities. The IEPA must at the very least strengthen the permit's conditions.”

The permit decision also fails to consider the impact on the community at large, despite requirements in Illinois state law that these potential impacts be considered. Critically, the permit utterly fails to consider that the coal produced from the mine will contribute to disastrous climate change. Mining and burning coal pursuant to the NPDES permit will be destructive to the environment and increase emissions of climate-warming greenhouse gases. The permit fails to consider the many side effects of mining practices as well, including land subsidence, coal dust, noise, and the loss of property values. Allowing coal plants like the Pond Creek coal mine to proceed with the status quo is contrary to Illinois' clean energy and climate goals.

Local community members and environmental advocates explicitly brought these concerns to the IEPA's attention as early as 2019, when local residents and advocates with Sierra Club Illinois and Prairie Rivers Network submitted hundreds of comments on the draft permit and raised concerns during a public hearing. Advocates have also highlighted Williamson Energy LLC's repeated inability to adhere to its relatively lax current permit. Since it began operation in 2005, the company is responsible for 78 water quality discharge violations at Pond Creek Mine alone. Given the coal company's ongoing violations, it's clear that additional oversight and a strengthened permit are

necessary in order to adequately protect Illinois waterways and the local community from further pollution and contamination.

“Coal mining is a dirty, dangerous, and increasingly outdated practice. For a century, Illinois has sacrificed water quality, farmland, and communities to allow coal mining, but it's time to turn to a better future,” says Sierra Club Illinois Director Jack Darin.

“We’re acting today to protect these communities now and for future generations. Illinois is now leading the way to a clean energy future, and it's time to hold polluting coal mines accountable for what they have done to our communities and say enough is enough.”