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Posted on Thu, Apr. 15, 2010

Tennessee cleanup sends coal ash, anxiety, to Alabama site

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last updated: April 20, 2010 05:11:43 PM

UNIONTOWN, Ala. — When the mound of wet coal ash began to rise in the landfill across the road from her pretty yellow house with the peonies and roses in the front yard, Ruby Holmes felt overpowered by a horrible smell.

A few doors down, Mary Williams, a retired Avon sales office manager, shut her windows and kept the air filters running and still couldn't sleep. She was nauseated. Her eyes, nose and throat burned, and her husband, a retired Greyhound driver, had trouble breathing.

"For a while, it was like we were just cast out and it didn't matter about people living (with) that crap," Williams said.

Uniontown's Arrowhead Landfill so far has taken in 1.8 million tons of coal ash from one of the nation's biggest environmental disasters, the December 2008 spill from a coal ash pond at a Tennessee Valley Authority power plant in Kingston, Tenn. Trains bring about 10,000 tons a day.

The transfer of the ash 327 miles from Tennessee to the mostly black community of Uniontown is partly a story about how people are faring at the receiving end. Federal environmental justice policy requires that low-income and minority communities aren't burdened with outsized environmental risks.

The story also is part of a larger national question of what to do with the ash built up from the nation's long dependence on coal to produce electricity.

Decisions about how to handle coal ash are left up to the states. The Environmental Protection Agency ruled during the presidency of George W. Bush that coal ash isn't hazardous. The agency now is reconsidering that finding. It was expected to unveil a new coal ash rule in December, but since then, deliberations have been going on behind closed doors in the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs.

The coal industry opposes regulating coal ash as a hazardous waste. It argues that there are no toxic hazards, that the labeling it as dangerous could rule out some uses of recycled coal ash and that disposal of ash that can't be reused would become more expensive. Some coal ash today is used to make cement and other products and for building up roads and embankments.

The U.S. produces about 130 million tons of coal ash a year, one of its largest kind of waste, according to the EPA.

In hundreds of places around the country, coal ash is stored in lagoons near power plants or in unlined landfills and abandoned quarries.

In many respects, the Arrowhead Landfill in Uniontown is much better. It has a nearly impervious clay layer over the groundwater, a plastic liner, and a system to contain and monitor the water that leaches off the waste.

People who live across the road from the landfill say the odor disappeared a few weeks ago, but they're still worried.

Ruby Holmes, who's 80, worries about breathing coal dust. She's lived here all her life. She was the daughter of the general store owner who bought the first TV in the area and on the Fourth of July would roast nine hogs for the community. She had 10 children and ran her family's farm, growing cotton and vegetables on land the landfill owns now.

"It was a real beautiful, enjoyable life, and all at once here comes this stuff across the road."

The ash is kept with 20 percent moisture content and wrapped in black plastic when it's sent from Tennessee, 327 miles away, by rail. Then it's dumped at the end of a 900-acre landfill that's closest to homes. Other parts of the vast tract for the landfill are still prairie and woods.

Uniontown, about 100 miles southwest of Birmingham, Ala., is a mostly black community with a few dozen store fronts, most of them closed, and a catfish feed mill and a prison just outside the town proper. When the EPA announced last summer that the ash would be shipped to Alabama, it said the landfill was in an isolated location. The Alabama Environmental Council counted 317 people out of the area's population of 1,600 who live within half a mile of it.

Mary Williams said it took help from a former state environmental official, attorney David Ludder, who notified landfill operators he planned to sue them about the odor.

She's also worried about health hazards. "I couldn't say anything but that it's hazardous," she said.

Booker T. Gipson, whose daughter lives beside the landfill with her children, said: "Everybody says it's not harmful. But if it was harmful to the people in Kingston, I want to know in a small location like Uniontown why it's not harmful to us."

"My biggest concern is I've got 16 cows over there and four horses," he said. Animals in nearby pastures drink from creeks that flow near the landfill.

John Wathen, an investigator for Ludder, photographed the site from the air and sampled water nearby. He said he took two water samples with high arsenic levels in the ditch across from the Williamses' home, and another from a water-treatment plant where wastewater from the landfill was taken. He also took a photograph that showed workers hosing out ash-covered railcars for the return trip to Tennessee. Wathen said that water runs to a creek alongside the tracks.

"What's happening right now is simply a transfer of the disaster from Kingston, Tennessee, to Perry County, Alabama," Wathen said.

Eddie Dorsett, president of Phill-Con Services, the operator of the landfill, said all the water that came into contact with ash or municipal solid waste was taken to a wastewater treatment facility, and not allowed to leave the landfill.

Inspectors have found no violations, he said. Water trucks spray the road, air monitors show the dust hasn't exceeded national standards, and "our supervisors are continuously monitoring dust and ensuring it is minimized."

Coal ash under Alabama law isn't regulated as a solid waste and so wouldn't have to be placed in a lined landfill like the one at Uniontown. The waste from Kingston, however, is considered "remediation waste" because it's from a spill, and so it falls under stricter regulation, said Scott Hughes, a spokesman for the Alabama Department of Environmental Management.

Although the ash and municipal waste was separated, water mixed through both of them, Hughes said. Dorsett said that the area also was hit with 20 inches of rain during the winter. The leaching water probably caused the odor, and the landfill operators recently started using two burners to incinerate the vapors that create the smell.

When the storage area for the ash is filled, the landfill company will be required to cap it with dirt and plants to make sure that the ash can't escape, Hughes said.

The permit for the landfill says that coal ash six inches deep can be used as a cover. Hughes said the daily cover would be different from the permanent cap on the Kingston ash.

At the spill site in Tennessee, workers spray a cover that hardens over the ash and keep it wet. Trucks are always on standby to spray it down when the wind picks up, said Barbara Martocci, a TVA spokeswoman.

The Environmental Integrity Project, a nonprofit group that presses for enforcement of environmental protection laws, said in a letter to the TVA this month that state and federal environmental protection officials hadn't collected the data needed to get a full understanding of the impact of the ash disposal on water and the air and on health.

The letter cites a study of the Kingston coal ash by researchers at Duke University and the Georgia Institute of Technology that concluded that the fine ash, which contains toxic metals such as lead and arsenic and radioactive material, "could have a severe health impact on local communities and workers."

EIP said that a more accurate test shows that coal ash produces water pollution with harmful concentrations of heavy metals.

The Electric Power Research Institute, the research arm of the electric utility industry, in a study posted on the American Coal Ash Association Web site, said that health risks from coal ash are minimal.

The TVA, the nation's largest public power company, supplies electricity to Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky, Georgia, North Carolina and Virginia at some of the lowest rates in the nation.

The government-owned electricity provider decided last summer to spend \$1.2 billion to \$2 billion to eliminate wet-ash disposal. The plants will be reconfigured to produce dry ash that can be placed in landfills instead of the wet material that's been stored over the past 50 years in ponds.

Uniontown residents say they don't know if they'll receive more coal ash.

The TVA plans to finish sending coal ash dredged from the Emory River — about 3 million tons — to the Uniontown landfill by May. It hasn't announced how it will handle more ash that still must be cleaned up, and its plans call for years of deliberation over where dried coal ash from its power plants will be stored.

The state environmental agency, which oversees the landfill, and Perry County, whose commissioners approved it, get a fee for the ash dumped there. The county expects to take in more than \$3 million for county roads, schools and other needs.

Ruby Holmes said she worked hard in the days when Uniontown businesses were thriving. She picked okra by the ton and worked in a shoe factory and a poultry plant. She thought her retirement would be spent relaxing in her perfectly ordered house and yard.

She said she doesn't look at the landfill gate when she drives by. "I'm too mad." But once she stopped. She told the guard that she wanted to complain about dust coating her car. He said the boss wasn't there.

"I said, you tell him Ms. Holmes, 80 years old, lives right up the road in the green-top house."

The next day a sign appeared. "Mud on the road."

The story makes her chuckle, but she said can't help worrying about the health risks of the ash pile.

"I feel that we've been mistreated down here," she said.

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