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New EPA Data Show Coal Ash Problem Much Worse

Number of coal ash ponds nationwide increases by over 60%

Washington, D.C. – Today the EPA released information revealing the existence of hundreds of previously unknown coal ash dumps nationwide. The information comes pursuant to a Freedom of Information Act request (FOIA) by Environmental Integrity Project and Earthjustice.

The data released today by the EPA reveal that there are at least 451 more coal ash ponds than previously acknowledged—significantly increasing the known threat from coal ash. The EPA had admitted to 710 ponds, and today’s numbers increase that total to at least 1,161. In addition, the agency previously did not know how many ponds were unlined. Today’s data indicate that at least 535 ponds (46 percent) operate without a liner to prevent hazardous chemicals from reaching drinking water sources.

The full list of responses from power plants about their coal ash ponds and landfills can be found at www.environmentalintegrity.org.

While 562 ponds are recorded as having a liner (64 plants did not answer the question), the EPA has not yet released data regarding what kind of liner is employed. Only a composite liner is sufficient to prevent the escape of dangerous levels of contaminants, and the EPA has estimated that the use of composite liners at coal ash ponds is very low.

“The public health threat from toxic coal ash continues to grow,” said Earthjustice attorney Lisa Evans. “The data today reveal that coal ash is being disposed in hundreds of units that are not fit to contain hazardous chemicals. The increased danger posed by coal ash dumps underscores the need for EPA to act. Congressional attempts to cater to the polluters and deny the EPA the authority to protect millions of Americans living near these sites is dangerous and misguided.”

The new data also reveal a significant increase in the number of coal ash landfills. In 2010, the EPA estimated that there were approximately 337 coal ash landfills, and the agency admitted that it did not know how many of these dumps had basic controls such as liners to stop the landfills from leaking. Today we know that there are at least 393 coal ash landfills (active, planned, and retired), 43 percent of the active and retired landfills lack liners; 52 percent of these active and retired landfills lack leachate collection systems.

“The new EPA data confirms that we are just beginning to realize the threat coal ash dumps pose to drinking water supplies and the health of nearby communities,” said Lisa Widawsky

Hallowell, attorney, Environmental Integrity Project. “Unlined ponds and landfills leach the toxic pollutants in coal ash – including known carcinogens like arsenic – into drinking water supplies and waterways, placing communities and the environment at risk. Federal standards are long overdue, yet Congress has tried to strip the EPA of its authority to require, and enforce, basic safeguards.”

Unfortunately, the EPA today did not reveal the existence of all of the nation’s coal ash dumps. According to the agency, many utilities made a “confidential business information” claim on the information they submitted, and the agency is unable to release this information until it determines that data related to waste management would not be protected.

The transportation bill is must pass legislation that will create 2.9 million jobs and fund much needed repair and maintenance work for our nation’s roads—the coal ash amendment would allow hundreds of ponds like the one that spilled in Tennessee in 2008 to operate indefinitely without basic safety standards. Household garbage would be better regulated than toxic coal ash, which is often contaminated with chemicals that can cause cancer and damage organs. Last week, [the House of Representatives voted to support the amendment](#). Senate and House conferees have been negotiating behind closed doors to potentially include this dangerous amendment that would continue to risk the health and safety of millions of American living near these dumps.

The EPA received this information from electric utilities pursuant to [an information collection request it sent](#) to hundreds of coal-fired power plants in 2010. That information collection request can be found here: http://water.epa.gov/scitech/wastetech/guide/steam_index.cfm#point6