

Coal Ash: A Guide for Ohio River Valley Communities

WHAT IS COAL ASH?

Coal ash is the the toxic waste product left over after coal is burned.

Historically, utilities have disposed of coal ash by digging large holes in the ground and dumping in the ash. These disposal sites are referred to as coal ash landfills. Sometimes ash is mixed with water to make it easier for companies to transport the ash to a dump. This creates coal ash “ponds.” Both of these types of dumps are often tens if not hundreds of acres.

EFFECTS ON HEALTH + ENVIRONMENT

When coal ash comes into contact with water, it allows toxins to dissolve out of the ash and into the water. Toxins from coal ash include arsenic, cadmium, lead, mercury and selenium. More than 95% of the coal ash ponds in the United States are unlined. Almost all of them are contaminating groundwater at levels higher than the EPA’s safe drinking water standards.

The EPA has found that living next to a coal ash disposal site can increase the risk of cancer and other diseases. This is especially true of those who live near an unlined wet ash pond and drink from a well [1]. Coal ash is also toxic to aquatic life [2].



COAL ASH RULES

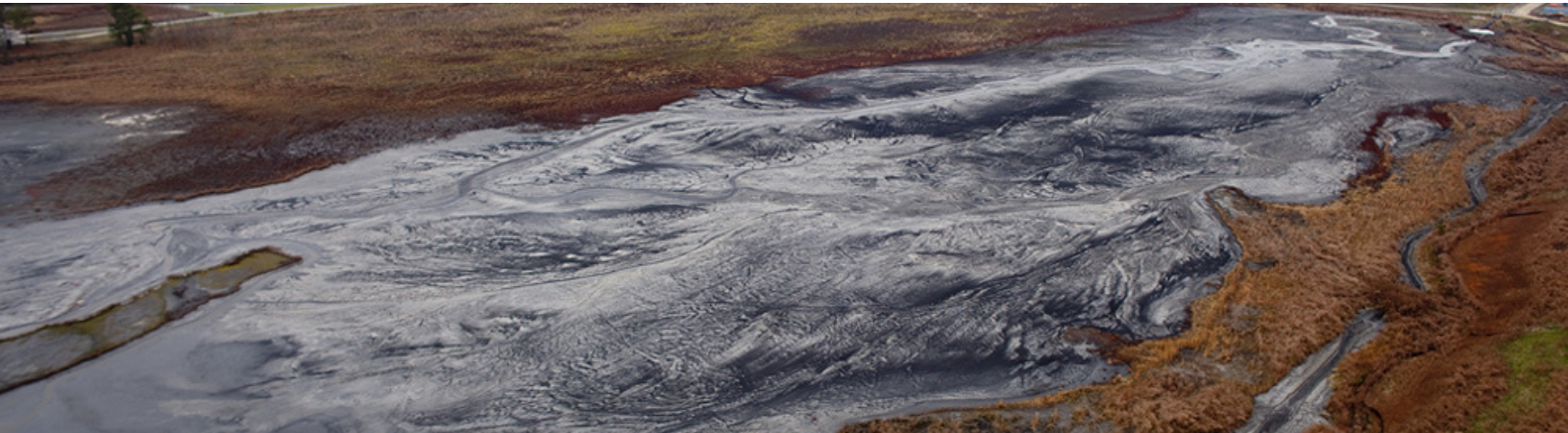
Before 2015, there were no laws protecting citizens from the dangers of coal ash. Under modern regulations, utilities must now update their previously unregulated ponds and landfills. Landfills must have a liner to keep water from becoming contaminated. According to the industry’s own data, more than 95% of the coal ash ponds in the United States are unlined.

The coal ash rules also dictate a schedule for when these disposal sites must comply with the new law. However, four coal burning utilities in WV are seeking permission to continue operating without a liner past the regulatory deadline.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

Policymakers, industry & communities must work together to keep the public safe from coal ash pollution. The safest solution is to update all coal ash disposal sites so that they meet regulatory requirements and deadlines. Industrial burning of coal and disposal of coal ash must be held accountable to the regulations that were put in place to protect human health and the environment.

YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE



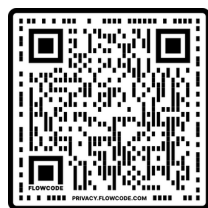
Coal ash spill. Photo: Appalachian Voices

BE AN ADVOCATE

Communities of color and low-income communities are often located closer to power plants and bear more of the burden of pollution and spills from coal ash. The proximity to industrial sites increases the risk of disease and economic hardship. Allowing continued operation of hazardous, unlined coal ash ponds is dangerous and unjust.

Your voice is the key to holding industry and policy-makers accountable for protecting the public from coal ash contamination.

Scan the QR code, or go to wvrivers.org to sign-up to receive updates, information, and actions you can take on environmental issues in West Virginia.



HOLD INDUSTRY ACCOUNTABLE

Once contamination is identified, coal plant operators must develop clean-up plans designed to repair the contaminated area within 180 days. Operators must host a public meeting to discuss their plan at least 30 days before the company decides on a path to recovery.

If you live in a community where a clean-up plan will take place, please contact us for resources about how you can participate in the cleanup effort. If the cleanup plan is not happening in accordance with the schedule or if the data reveals that the plan is not effective, alert us.

If you drink from a well and live near one of these power stations, it's important to know what's in your water. The Mountain Watershed Association and WV Rivers Coalition both provide small grants for grassroots groups to advocate for environmental justice. These grants can be used to obtain funding for drinking water testing. Contact us for more information.



Robb Kendrick/ National Geographic


[1] [<https://earthjustice.org/features/coal-ash-contaminated-sites-map>

[2] https://www.ucsusa.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/repairing-the-damage-report_2.pdf

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