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Toxic Ash Dumping to remain secret; Georgia House Committee fails to vote on bills requiring community notification

Atlanta - This week the Georgia House Natural Resources and Environment committee declined to pass legislation that would notify residents when toxic pollutants are being dumped into nearby rivers, lakes and landfills.

Concerned property owners have been calling on legislators to protect their properties and their communities from coal ash pollution. Coal ash is the waste left over from burning coal. Residents are concerned that polluted water from coal ash could affect their property values and their families' health.

"I recently learned that they are going to dewater some coal ash ponds upstream of where my family & I own property on the Flint River," said Robin Singletary, CoveyRise Plantation in Mitchell County. "We swim here, fish here, make our living here including running a lodge, drinking the water, and irrigating the crops. I think that the government should notify people before they allow this waste to be dumped in rivers and landfills."

Several high profile events in Georgia have highlighted the pollution issues from the improper disposal of coal ash-filled water. In 2002, a sinkhole opened up beneath Georgia Power's coal ash pond at Plant Bowen near Cartersville. This spill dumped more than two million gallons of ash-filled water into the Etowah River system. In 2016, the company announced plans to close 29 ash ponds all over the state.

Under our current laws, utilities (in and out of state) can also ship ash to Georgia's municipal solid waste landfills. These landfills can receive thousands of tons of coal ash every day without notifying the local community and nearby property owners.

Last year, Jesup residents found out that a landfill near their homes and wells leaked toxic metals found in coal ash into the soil and groundwater. The landfill company is proposing to make the landfill bigger and accept even more of the toxic waste.

"It felt like a punch in the gut," said Peggy Riggins, Jesup resident. "We found out that toxins found in coal ash were underneath the landfill in our county. The government and the landfill knew for years before we were ever told. This is unacceptable. Our communities deserve to know about proposals to bring in toxic coal waste before its too late and has caused a problem."

In January, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper learned from a state agency document review that Georgia Power began dewatering coal ash ponds at Atlanta's Plant McDonough in December of 2016. There are a total of 11 coal ash ponds in the Chattahoochee River basin. The ponds contain an estimated 872 million gallons of coal ash and wastewater. For reference, the Georgia Aquarium's tank holds about 10 million gallons of water. "Georgia Power is set to close 29 coal ash ponds all over the state, so we are only talking about 29, 30-day public notices," said Jason Ulseth, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper. "At a minimum, the public deserves to know when toxic water will be discharged into the river so they can take appropriate precautions to protect the health of their families, crops, and livestock."

"At its heart, coal ash pollution is damaging to both the physical and economic health of Georgians," said Jenifer Hilburn, Executive Director and Riverkeeper for the Altamaha Riverkeeper. "Middle Georgia offers a good snapshot of the type of people that are most affected by coal ash. The typical affected resident relies on well water, and due to limited economic means, has been unable to test the quality of their water. The Altamaha Riverkeeper has tested the wells for them, and the results show high levels of toxic elements. According to anecdotal reports, many of the residents are battling cancer, have seen the health of their livestock decline, and a deterioration of soil quality."

Friday is Crossover Day at the Capitol. Residents and concerned citizens are urging the House of Representatives to pass this legislation before it's too late.

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ABOUT COAL ASH

The negative effects of coal ash, waste created from burning coal, are numerous and growing. Coal ash contains mercury, cadmium, arsenic, silica, hexavalent chromium and selenium, among other heavy and toxic metals. In Georgia, it is typically stored in open air pits and surface waste ponds, many of which are unlined. Spills and seepage from waste ponds, contaminates surface and groundwater supplies. Releases of dry coal ash from open air pits and uncovered trucks during transport results in millions of microscopic particles flying through the air and being breathed into the deepest parts of our lungs.

Among the many risks to human health from coal ash are increased risk of cancer, silicosis, learning disabilities, neurological disorders, birth defects, reproductive failure, asthma, and impaired bone growth in children. Children, the elderly and persons with weak or compromised systems are more susceptible to these risks. One component of coal ash, hexavalent chromium, is the same dangerous chemical made famous by Erin Brokovich whose small California town was ravaged by cancer, and is highly toxic even in small doses. Hexavalent chromium has been shown to cause cancer when both breathed in and consumed orally.

The [Georgia Water Coalition](#) is a consortium of 230 conservation and environmental organizations, hunting and fishing groups, businesses, and faith-based organizations that have been working to protect Georgia's water since 2002. Collectively, these organizations represent more than 300,000 Georgians.