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Coal Ash Spill Anniversary as Forgotten as Disaster Itself

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[John Wathen](#)

Ruby Holmes, 80, who has lived in a house right across the street from the Arrowhead Landfill in Perry County all her life, says when she tries to sleep with her window cracked, "This odor wakes me up at night."

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by Glynn Wilson

On the third day before Christmas in 2008, the people living along the Emory River in East Tennessee were listening to the songs on the radio about a white Christmas like everybody else in the country, trying to look forward and not back. A new president had been elected and would soon occupy the White House, a president who promised "hope" after eight years of Bush and war and unprecedented corruption, as well as increasing economic hardship squeezing the middle class like a juggernaut.

Instead of a white Christmas, though, people like Steve Scarborough of the Dagger Kayak and Canoe company woke up to a black-gray mess of epic proportions, a river full of toxic coal ash from the Tennessee Valley Authority's coal-fired power plant at Kingston, Tennessee.

"There are no excuses for this," Scarborough said. "One of the dumbest things humans do is dig coal out of the ground and burn it."

The largely affluent population of the area demanded action and an immediate cleanup of the largest environmental disaster in American history in the lower 48 states, second only to the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Prince Williams Sound, Alaska, in the spring of 1989. So within four months, by [March 20](#), TVA began dredging the mountain of coal ash out of the river and shipping it by train to a landfill in the poor Black Belt of Alabama.

One year later, on the first anniversary of the second worst environmental disaster in American history, while the people in Tennessee are hiring lawyers and suing TVA and reading story after story in the local newspapers about their plight while the cleanup continues, the poor people of Perry County, Alabama, where TVA found a place to dump the toxic ash, are not singing Christmas carols. They are locked in their homes with their air conditioners running even in winter trying to stay out of the gaseous fumes from the landfill where the coal ash is piling up on top of household garbage by the freight train load.

There's not a newspaper or a TV station anywhere around telling their story, and most of them are so poor and living in such a remote, rural area that they

can't even turn to the Internet, either to voice their concerns and get organized or find out what's going on to help them, if there is anything. They are not hearing much out of their local government officials or the congressmen elected to represent them either, so they are living in the dark with a nagging fear for the future.

North of the landfill, other residents with nowhere to go to escape the gaseous smell from the liquid waste being dumped from the landfill into a nearby lagoon, are hooked up to oxygen tanks and wondering where in the world the birds have gone.

There's not even an organized environmental group to help them within a hundred miles, so their cause has fallen to [John Wathen, the Hurricane Creekkeeper](#) in Tuscaloosa to the north, who has been making the trip down periodically to monitor the water and document what is clearly an environmental justice situation with major ecological and sociological implications.

"TVA officials want you to believe the 1.1-billion gallon coal ash spill at their Kingston plant was due to an 'act of God,'" Wathen says. "And now Perry County Commissioner Albert Turner Jr. calls receiving the toxic ash a 'godsend'."

County commissioners and even the congressman from the district who wants to be Alabama's first black governor, Artur Davis, have done nothing to represent the poor people who are living with the coal ash in their air and water. In fact, they have said the money being pumped into the county coffers from landfill tipping fees is providing much needed revenue to one of the poorest counties in the country.

According to Wathen, however, "The truth is that this toxic disaster is neither an act of God or a godsend." It is a nightmare before Christmas.

"While his constituents are complaining of malodorous gases and respiratory problems, Turner is issuing a clarion call to bring more toxic waste to Perry County — and with it \$3.5 million for the county government," Wathen says. "The truth is that nothing says clean coal like dirty money."

The disaster that ruined the Emory River was 100 percent manmade, the result of a lax regulatory structure where the waste from coal-fired power plants was not managed at all. TVA, Southern Company and other power companies have been piling the ash up for years alongside rivers and streams, even getting rid of some of it by [encouraging farmers to dump it on their land](#).

That practice has all but stopped now, however. When the makeshift retaining wall failed in Kingston, sending out a mountain of ash to fill up a six-mile stretch of one of the most pristine rivers in the Southeastern U.S. like a giant volcanic lava flow, it was a wakeup call to federal regulators. Although to date, the federal Environmental Protection Agency has taken no steps to classify coal ash in any regulated category.

According to [environmental lawyer David Ludder](#), who has filed documents indicating an intent to sue the Arrowhead Landfill in Perry County if something is not done to contain the air and water pollution from impacting the health of nearby residents, there is a problem with regulating the coal ash as hazardous waste.

If the EPA were to declare tomorrow that the waste should be disposed of in a hazardous waste landfill, that could stop the shipments from the Tennessee and potentially halt the massive cleanup itself. So Ludder believes the EPA will at some point classify the ash as solid waste, "due to the widespread impact of the cost."

Even if that is the result, landfills that accept the waste must still manage the liquid waste in a responsible manner, which is obviously not being done in Marion, Alabama.

Contractors hired by TVA to dredge the Emory River are loading as much as 30 percent water in the plastic-lined train cars. Some experts say transporting the ash wet is better than moving it dry, which would just cause the toxic substances in the waste to get airborne and affect even more people.

What to do with the liquid is seriously problematic. Since a stink was raised about the liquid waste a few weeks ago, shipments of the co-called "leachate" have stopped going to a nearby lagoon sewer system that is already overrun with waste from a local cheese factory. Landfill company managers and county officials are trying to negotiate deals for other sewer systems in nearby communities such as Demopolis to take the liquid, but there are concerns about lawsuits, so neighboring communities are reluctant to get involved.

Since the lagoon controversy was uncovered and reported on by [The Locust Fork News-Journal](#), an alternative independent news Website, Wathen has taken photographs at night showing workers pumping liquid runoff from the landfill into contiguous ditches and even onto the road in front of people's houses. It is at night and when trucks dump their load that people say the odor is the worst.

Ruby Holmes, 80, who has lived in the house right across the street from the landfill all her life, says when she tries to sleep with her window cracked, "This odor wakes me up at night." When asked to describe the odor, she says, "It smells like some kind of gas. It gets all through my house and smells like rotten eggs. I'm very concerned about my health. I'm breathing this stuff. It's going into my lungs."

Ms. Holmes used to grow a garden on the rich land of the Black Belt, but recently she has given up the practice. She has seen the buzzards coming from the landfill "pooping" in her garden, so she is reluctant to eat the vegetables. She didn't even plant a garden this year. She has also noticed a bad smell in her well water, "an old smell like it has been sitting there for a long time," she said.

She has lived in the same place her entire life and used to enjoy a cup of coffee on the front porch in the morning. Now, she says, it is "not much of a life at all. Nobody listens."

Jackie Fike, who lives near the treatment plant and lagoon where some of the wastewater from the landfill is being dumped and whose wife is now forced to stay inside on oxygen most of the time, said he used to see a lot of birds around

“We hardly have a bird now,” he said. “This stuff is about to kill a lot of fish, a lot of people”

According to Ludder and Wathen, who have test results from water samples to back it up, the coal ash contains numerous toxic, radioactive and carcinogenic compounds such as arsenic, chromium, lead, mercury, thorium and uranium. The cancer risk to elderly folks and children who drink water contaminated with arsenic from coal combustion waste is 900 times higher than EPA’s recommended level of risk.

“The unfortunate thing all around is that the government that was supposed to protect the people, once again, is not doing it,” Ludder said. “And the people have to face the consequences”

Since the disaster one year ago, the Kingston ‘disaster ash,’ as it is known here, “has spread like a cancer across the Southeast,” Wathen says. “It has now come into contact with eight river systems.”

That includes the Emory, Clinch and Tennessee Rivers, which run into the Mississippi. When the waste is shipped to Perry County where the Arrowhead Landfill drains to the Alabama River then to the Tombigbee River. The leachate created by the wet ash is trucked to Marion, Alabama where it was discharged into Rice Creek and other streams that flow into the Cahaba River. Now since some of the liquid is being trucked to Demopolis, it too ends up discharged into the Tombigbee River, which ends up flowing into the Mobile River.

“Just like the cancer it carries with it,” Wathen says, “this ash has impacted people in places who have never heard of Kingston Tennessee, destroying their quality of life and peace of mind.”



TVA clean up of coal ash spill continues apace in the Emory River near Kingston, Tennessee.



[John Wathen/Southwings](#)

Toxic coal ash by the train load is filling up the local landfill only designed for household garbage, not hazardous waste, in Alabama's Black Belt..