

# Perry County Herald

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## **Creekkeeper fears environmental damage**

### ***Says water in Rice Creek already contaminated by lagoon***

The Arrowhead Landfill's foray into coal ash disposal will be "more problematic than profitable," said waterkeeper John Wathen as he discussed a host of problems he claims are involved with the Uniontown site Wednesday.

Wathen is a Tuscaloosa-based environmental activist and researcher and founder of Friends of Hurricane Creek, as well as being involved in nationwide environmental watchdog groups. His nearly thirty years working to uncover problems from the coal industry led him to the scene of the Kingston, Tennessee coal ash spill within days of the incident in 2008. Little could anyone know at the time, however, that the tons of waste would wind up in Wathen's home state of Alabama.

Since the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency cleared TVA's plan to ship the coal ash to Perry County, Wathen has investigated what he claims are serious environmental violations at the landfill and elsewhere.

At the landfill site, he has taken aerial and ground level photographs he says depict a variety of violations. Wathen says the photos show coal ash being left exposed to the elements, leachate from the landfill being pumped into various unlined areas in the landfill, even pumped from the landfill into ditches along County Road 1.

Workers at the landfill scoop the ash from the train cars in which it arrives, breaking through the protective "burrito wrap" that which keeps the ash from leaking out of its container. The ash is then trucked about a mile and a half to the landfill cells where it will be buried. Wathen claims his photographs show the coal ash in the open air and even being used to cover solid waste refuse at the site.

Liquid from the ash, still soggy with Emory River water, combines with rainwater and other fluids from the waste in landfill cells produce leachate Wathen believes may be

toxic. The first problem, he says, is the amount of moisture within the ash. "The stuff is not 30% moisture content as specified." The addition of the other moisture sources creates the surplus of leachate. "It's creating too much leachate for anyone around here to handle," said Wathen of area wastewater treatment plants.

Landfill operators had sent some of the leachate to be disposed of at Marion's municipal wastewater lagoon until allegations by Wathen and David Ludder, an environmental lawyer retained by local residents, surfaced. They pointed to research showing highly elevated levels of harmful materials such as arsenic and ammonia in the lagoon. More troubling, Wathen says they also found these toxins in "post-treatment" water, water that has been processed through the lagoon and presumed safe for discharge. He points to results showing elevated toxins in water from Rice Creek, a tributary of the Cahaba River.

Now, since regulatory agencies have stopped leachate shipments to Marion, "Demopolis is taking a limited amount, but we don't know what is happening to the rest," Wathen said. Wathen estimates an "enormous" amount of leachate being created every day at the Uniontown site. Each leachate truck leaving Arrowhead carries 5000 to 6000 gallons of liquid per trip, and some days saw as many as 21 trips to the Marion lagoon, equaling hundreds of thousands of gallons. To this end, Wathen makes perhaps the most disturbing claim: he says workers at Arrowhead appear to be moving leachate around the landfill during the day and pumping it out of the landfill into roadside ditches at night.

The Kingston spill and its aftermath are just part of a larger controversy over the safety and scope of the coal industry currently being debated in Washington and beyond. Wathen makes his position in the debate clear: "Clean coal is a dirty lie. You can't make coal clean. If we spent as much energy and money on renewable energy research as what we do on coal industry commercials about 'clean coal,' we could have an economic boom that would put Silicon Valley to shame."

Wathen went on to say the costs of the coal industry include the lives of coal miners; the destruction of mountains, cut down to make strip mining easier; and obviously the problem of what to do with the byproducts created by its combustion.

To those who claim that the coal ash is safe and even beneficial, Wathen's words are simple and direct. "Coal ash is dangerous, especially in these volumes." Although some products may be safely made from coal ash, Wathen said the coal ash from the Kingston site was rejected by manufacturers of coal ash-derived products as being too toxic. "This coal ash is not the same coal ash that Commissioner Turner is bragging about his counter tops being made from," he said.

In the near future, Wathen said he expects more attempts by utility companies and the coal industry to place coal ash in Arrowhead and similar facilities. "I think what

they're trying to do is make it where all coal ash can be placed in household waste facilities." Wathen says he has heard rumors that the Arrowhead Landfill has already been accepting coal ash from other sources, but cautions that information is unverified.

In the long term, Wathen sees the landfill and even the lagoon ending up as "large Superfund sites," referring to the EPA classification of abandoned hazardous waste sites that pose imminent environmental threats. He says he fears for the safety of local residents and their property and livestock. As an example, Wathen referred to one picture he took of the landfill with catfish ponds, some downstream from the landfill, visible in the distance.

Meanwhile, Wathen promises more action against the corporations and individuals who he says are threatening the health of Perry County residents. "It's the corporate fat cats who do things that are environmentally illegal or ethical. They don't care about the men, the environment, or the communities they destroy."