

Officials clash over coal ash in Perry County

By Tom Gordon -- The Birmingham News

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A trackhoe scoops up spilled coal ash which is being loaded into rail cars for shipment to an Alabama landfill in Perry County for disposal. (Special/TVA)

Perry County Commissioner Albert Turner Jr. plans to tell a congressional hearing that his historically poor county is being transformed because of the money it is receiving from shipments of coal ash.

"How do we spell relief? COAL ASH," Turner says in remarks prepared for a Wednesday hearing of the House Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment. The subject of the hearing is the one-year anniversary of the spilling of 5.4 million tons of coal ash at the Tennessee Valley Authority's Kingston Fossil Fuel Plant in Roane County, Tenn.

A massive landfill near the southern Perry County town of Uniontown has been taking shipments of the spilled coal ash since July, and expects to receive 3 million tons over the next 12 to 18 months. For each shipment, the county charges a fee of \$1.05 a ton. The fees will boost the majority-black county's budget to \$8 million, Turner says. That amount nearly doubles the county's annual budget before the ash shipments started.

"The facility is second to none, and the impact to our community has been a godsend," Turner says in his prepared remarks. "The contract between TVA and Arrowhead Landfill has provided the county with an economic windfall unseen since the state of Texas struck oil . . . On behalf of the 11,735 citizens and the one citizen who has come to the Perry County Commission and voiced her complaint not about the coal ash itself, but about the amount of coal ash that we would be receiving, I say thank you and send us some more."

Coal ash, a gray powdery substance, is produced when coal is burned to produce energy. It contains such materials as silica, unburned carbon and metals such as arsenic, cadmium, copper, lead, mercury, nickel and zinc. A federal Environmental Protection Agency fact sheet notes the ash also contains radium, a radioactive substance that occurs naturally in coal.

David Ludder, an environmental attorney and former general counsel at the Alabama Department of Environmental Management, **says the EPA should not allow the landfill to receive any more coal ash**

because it does not have a valid state permit to dispose of its leachate or wastewater in a wastewater treatment plant in the Perry County seat of Marion. Ludder also says gases from the plant's lagoon are causing respiratory problems for area residents.

On Monday, Ludder filed a petition on behalf of 14 Perry County residents, asking the EPA to stop the shipments of coal ash to Perry County, saying the landfill is violating state air and water quality laws.

According to the Environmental Integrity Project, "There are no federal rules setting standards for the safe disposal of ash or limiting the discharge of toxic leachate into our waterways. EPA has announced that it will propose regulations for disposal of coal ash by the end of 2009." Turner said Ludder's charges are baseless and does not give them any focus in his prepared remarks.

"The disposal of coal ash in Perry County, Ala., has changed the landscape of the county and has put renewed hope back in a once proud county," he says. "Perry County led the way during the 1960s in the field of civil and voting rights; we are now poised to lead the way in environmental disposal of coal ash." If the EPA or TVA stops the flow of coal ash in Perry County, "it would be economic racism," Turner says.

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