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Tennessee cleanup sends coal ash, anxiety, to Alabama site

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UNIONTOWN, Ala. — When the mound of wet coal ash began to rise in the landfill across the peonies and roses in the front yard, Ruby Holmes felt overpowered by a horrible smell.

A few doors down, Mary Williams, a retired Avon sales office manager, shut her windows at sleep. She was nauseated. Her eyes, nose and throat burned, and her husband, a retired Gre

"For a while, it was like we were just cast out and it didn't matter about people living (with)

Uniontown's Arrowhead Landfill so far has taken in 1.8 million tons of coal ash from one of December 2008 spill from a coal ash pond at a Tennessee Valley Authority power plant in K day.

The transfer of the ash 327 miles from Tennessee to the mostly black community of Uniontown at the receiving end. Federal environmental justice policy requires that low-income and minority environmental risks.

The story also is part of a larger national question of what to do with the ash built up from the electricity.

Decisions about how to handle coal ash are left up to the states. The Environmental Protection Agency said W. Bush that coal ash isn't hazardous. The agency now is reconsidering that finding. It was in December, but since then, deliberations have been going on behind closed doors in the White House Affairs.

The coal industry opposes regulating coal ash as a hazardous waste. It argues that there are ways to rule out some uses of recycled coal ash and that disposal of ash that can't be reused will be used to make cement and other products and for building up roads and embankments.

The U.S. produces about 130 million tons of coal ash a year, one of its largest kind of waste,

In hundreds of places around the country, coal ash is stored in lagoons near power plants or

In many respects, the Arrowhead Landfill in Uniontown is much better. It has a nearly impermeable liner, and a system to contain and monitor the water that leaches off the waste.

People who live across the road from the landfill say the odor disappeared a few weeks ago,

Ruby Holmes, who's 80, worries about breathing coal dust. She's lived here all her life. She bought the first TV in the area and on the Fourth of July would roast nine hogs for the community farm, growing cotton and vegetables on land the landfill owns now.

"It was a real beautiful, enjoyable life, and all at once here comes this stuff across the road."

The ash is kept with 20 percent moisture content and wrapped in black plastic when it's sent. It's dumped at the end of a 900-acre landfill that's closest to homes. Other parts of the vast site

Uniontown, about 100 miles southwest of Birmingham, Ala., is a mostly black community with a catfish feed mill and a prison just outside the town proper. When the EPA announced the location in Alabama, it said the landfill was in an isolated location. The Alabama Environmental Council has about 1,600 members who live within half a mile of it.

Mary Williams said it took help from a former state environmental official, attorney David I. Williams, to sue them about the odor.

She's also worried about health hazards. "I couldn't say anything but that it's hazardous," she said.

Booker T. Gipson, whose daughter lives beside the landfill with her children, said: "Everybody in the area, the people in Kingston, I want to know in a small location like Uniontown why it's not harmful."

"My biggest concern is I've got 16 cows over there and four horses," he said. Animals in the area are kept away from the landfill.

John Wathen, an investigator for the state, photographed the site from the air and sampled water. He found high arsenic levels in the ditch across from the Williamses' home, and another from a ditch near the landfill was taken. He also took a photograph that showed workers hosing out ash-covered roads. Wathen said that water runs to a creek alongside the tracks.

"What's happening right now is simply a transfer of the disaster from Kingston, Tennessee, to Alabama," he said.

Eddie Dorsett, president of Phill-Con Services, the operator of the landfill, said all the water and solid waste was taken to a wastewater treatment facility, and not allowed to leave the landfill.

Inspectors have found no violations, he said. Water trucks spray the road, air monitors show low levels, and "our supervisors are continuously monitoring dust and ensuring it is minimized."

Coal ash under Alabama law isn't regulated as a solid waste and so wouldn't have to be placed in a landfill. The waste from Kingston, however, is considered "remediation waste" because it's from a spill. Scott Hughes, a spokesman for the Alabama Department of Environmental Management, said that.

Although the ash and municipal waste was separated, water mixed through both of them, Hughes said. He said that with 20 inches of rain during the winter. The leaching water probably caused the odor, and the workers had to burners to incinerate the vapors that create the smell.

When the storage area for the ash is filled, the landfill company will be required to cap it with a concrete slab to prevent escape, Hughes said.

The permit for the landfill says that coal ash six inches deep can be used as a cover. Hughes said that the company will put a permanent cap on the Kingston ash.

At the spill site in Tennessee, workers spray a cover that hardens over the ash and keep it wet to prevent dust when the wind picks up, said Barbara Martocci, a TVA spokeswoman.

The Environmental Integrity Project, a nonprofit group that presses for enforcement of environmental laws, said that TVA this month that state and federal environmental protection officials hadn't collected the data to assess the impact of the ash disposal on water and the air and on health.

The letter cites a study of the Kingston coal ash by researchers at Duke University and the Georgia Institute of Technology. "The fine ash, which contains toxic metals such as lead and arsenic and radioactive material, is a health hazard to nearby communities and workers."

EIP said that a more accurate test shows that coal ash produces water pollution with harmful effects.

The Electric Power Research Institute, the research arm of the electric utility industry, in a recent report on its Association Web site, said that health risks from coal ash are minimal.

The TVA, the nation's largest public power company, supplies electricity to Tennessee, Alabama, North Carolina and Virginia at some of the lowest rates in the nation.

The government-owned electricity provider decided last summer to spend \$1.2 billion to \$2 billion to reconfigure its plants to produce dry ash that can be placed in landfills instead of the wet material storage ponds.

Uniontown residents say they don't know if they'll receive more coal ash.

The TVA plans to finish sending coal ash dredged from the Emory River — about 3 million tons — to a new facility in Alabama. It has announced how it will handle more ash that still must be cleaned up, and its plans call for years of work. Some of its power plants will be stored.

The state environmental agency, which oversees the landfill, and Perry County, whose communities have been affected by the ash dumped there. The county expects to take in more than \$3 million for county roads, schools and other services.

Ruby Holmes said she worked hard in the days when Uniontown businesses were thriving. She owned a furniture factory and a poultry plant. She thought her retirement would be spent relaxing in her perfect home.

She said she doesn't look at the landfill gate when she drives by. "I'm too mad." But once she sees the ash, she can't help but complain about dust coating her car. He said the boss wasn't there.

"I said, you tell him Ms. Holmes, 80 years old, lives right up the road in the green-top house."

The next day a sign appeared. "Mud on the road."

The story makes her chuckle, but she said she can't help worrying about the health risks of the ash.

"I feel that we've been mistreated down here," she said.

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