

# Coal ash is contaminating water, damaging health in 34 states, groups say

May 7 2009, By Renee Schoof

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People in 34 states who live near 210 coal ash lagoons or landfills with inadequate lining have a higher risk of cancer and other diseases from contaminants in their drinking water, two environmental groups reported Thursday.

Twenty-one states have five or more of the high-risk disposal sites near coal-fired power plants. The groups -- the Environmental Integrity Project and Earthjustice -- said a 2002 [Environmental Protection Agency](#) document that the agency didn't release until March of this year adds information about toxic releases from these facilities to nearby water systems and data on how some contaminants accumulate in fish and deer and can harm the health of people who hunt and fish.

The report said that people who live near the most problematic disposal sites have as much as a 1-in-50 chance of getting cancer from drinking water contaminated by arsenic. The highest risk is for people who live near ash ponds with no liners and who get their water from wells.

The report said the ash ponds also produced an increased risk of damage to the liver and other organs from exposure to such metals as cadmium, cobalt and lead, and other pollutants.

Although the health information mainly came from an EPA study released in August 2007, the information was largely neglected and was too technical for most people to understand, the groups said. The report and a chart of the sites "takes the numbers and fleshes them out so the

most dangerous units are identified," said Lisa Evans, an attorney with Earthjustice.

Evans also said that the actual number of [coal ash](#) disposal sites is nearly three times larger. EPA has long estimated there are about 600 ponds and landfills storing the material, but its 2007 survey only looked at 210.

Coal-fired power plants annually dispose of an estimated 100 million tons of ash and sludge scrubbed out of their emissions. The EPA has found that the highest [health risks](#) are from water contamination from unlined ponds where both coal ash and other waste products from coal are mixed. It also found unlined ponds increased the risk of other problems, such as damage to the liver and other organs. The risk also is elevated when the disposal sites are only lined with clay.

Evans said that proper storage requires drying the ash and sealing it in a landfill with a double liner of clay and a synthetic material, plus groundwater monitoring and a collection system for any water and pollutants that leak out. She said the EPA should require this kind of storage and close poorly lined lagoons and landfills and safely secure their contents.

EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson has said that making a decision about whether to regulate the ash sites would be a priority for her. The EPA sent questionnaires about the disposal sites to companies and is collecting the information.

The EPA plans to propose coal ash regulations by December.

Since the spill at Kingston, the EPA has been working to prevent future threats to health and the environment, said EPA spokeswoman Adora Andy.

"Working closely with other federal agencies and the states, EPA is expeditiously evaluating all liquid coal impoundments in the country to determine whether they raise the type of structural integrity issue that led to the TVA spill," she said. "EPA is also quickly moving forward to develop regulations to address the management of coal combustion residuals."

The two environmental groups said that the Bush administration withheld information about the health risks from coal ash until the EPA released the 2007 report, and that it never agreed to their request that it release the 2002 report. In other cases, the Bush administration replied to document requests by giving materials with the health risks blacked out, they said.

The EPA for decades has declined to impose regulations on coal ash disposal. Then in December, the issue gained new attention when a Tennessee Valley Authority pond burst and spread contaminated sludge near Kingston, Tenn.

Based on information from most of the nation's utilities, the EPA estimates there are 427 coal ash ponds, the environmental groups said.

A previous EPA estimate showed 300 ponds.

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(The 21 states mentioned in the second graf and the number of sites in each are: North Carolina (17); Indiana (15); Illinois (14); Ohio (12); Georgia (11); Kentucky (11); Tennessee (11); Texas (10); Alabama (9); Iowa (7); Michigan (7); South Carolina (7); West Virginia (7); Wisconsin (7); Wyoming (6); Kansas (5); Louisiana (5); Maryland (5); North Dakota (5); Oklahoma (5); and Pennsylvania (5).

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ON THE WEB

The Earthjustice/EIP report, charts of sites and other documents:  
[environmentalintegrity.org/pub640.cfm](http://environmentalintegrity.org/pub640.cfm)

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