

# Disposal of spilled coal ash a long, winding trip

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In this Wednesday, Feb. 10, 2010 file photo, shows machines working at the massive Arrowhead Landfill near Uniontown, Ala. More than a year after a Tennessee coal ash spill created one of the worst environmental disasters of its kind in U.S. history, the problem is seeping into several other states. (AP Photo/Jay Reeves, File)

(AP) -- More than a year after a Tennessee coal ash spill created one of the worst environmental disasters of its kind in U.S. history, the problem is seeping into several other states.

It began Dec. 22, 2008, when a retaining pond burst at a coal-burning power plant, spilling 5.4 million cubic yards of coal ash across 300 acres into the Emory River and an upscale shoreline community near Knoxville. It was enough ash to cover a square mile five feet deep.

While the Tennessee Valley Authority's cleanup has removed much of the ash from the river, the arsenic- and mercury-laced muck or its watery discharge has been moving by rail and truck through three states to at least six different sites. Some of it may end up as far away as Louisiana.

At every stop along the route, new environmental concerns pop up. The coal-ash muck is laden with [heavy metals](#) linked to cancer, and the U.S. [Environmental Protection Agency](#) is considering declaring coal ash hazardous.

"I'm really concerned about my health," said retiree James Gibbs, 53, who lives near a west-central Alabama landfill that is taking the ash. "I want to plant a garden. I'm concerned about it getting in the soil." Gibbs said that since last summer there has been a "bad odor, like a natural gas odor."

After the spill, the TVA started sending as many as 17,000 rail carloads of ash almost 350 miles south to the landfill in Uniontown, Ala. At least 160 rail shipments have gone out from the cleanup site, said TVA spokeswoman Barbara Martocci.

Since the EPA approved that plan, unusually heavy rain - including about 25 inches from November through February - has forced the landfill to deal with up to 100,000 gallons a day of tainted water.

The landfill operators first sent it to wastewater treatment plants - a common way that landfills deal with excess liquid - in two nearby Alabama cities, Marion and Demopolis.

After what the EPA calls unrelated problems with ammonia in Marion, the landfill in January started using a commercial wastewater treatment plant in Mobile, Ala., 500 miles from the original spill.

A month ago, however, after a public outcry about discharging it into Mobile Bay, that company refused to take more of the landfill water.

A private treatment facility in Cartersville, Ga., also briefly took some of the befouled liquid in February, although Georgia environmental officials said Friday the company did not have a required state permit.

Hi-Tech Water Treatment Services stopped accepting wastewater from the Alabama landfill, manager Amalia Cox said, after becoming "concerned about payments and the publicity."

In a landfill management plan presented to Alabama environmental officials, tanker trucks could haul the dirty water to a non-hazardous waste disposal site in Louisiana and to a public wastewater plant in Mississippi. The plan also says there are "negotiations underway" on taking it to an unspecified facility in Georgia.

Neither the TVA, the companies hired to take the ash, nor environmental regulators want to discuss the disposal problems.

TVA's coal ash cleanup manager, Steve McCracken, and agency spokeswoman Martocci referred disposal questions to Knoxville, Tenn.-based contractor Phillips & Jordan.

So did the owners of the 977-acre landfill, Perry-Uniontown Ventures and Perry County Associates.

Phillips & Jordan, which operates the Alabama landfill with a subsidiary, Phill-Con Services, has a \$95 million disposal contract with TVA.

The operators, who are in a financial dispute with the landfill owners, referred questions about the ash water to a Nashville public relations firm, McNeely, Pigott and Fox.

In a statement issued through the PR firm, Phill-Con Services president Eddie Dorsett said the landfill had received about 1.4 million tons of TVA's coal ash with another 1.6 million tons projected for delivery. Dorsett declined to answer questions about where the ash water is being taken for treatment or any problems it may have caused elsewhere.

In a letter to Alabama environmental officials, the landfill operators said they are trying to reduce the excess wastewater, partly by using lime and soil to solidify it. They also said TVA is making new efforts to "minimize moisture in the ash waste or to better bind up the moisture in the ash waste."

TVA's McCracken said he was unaware of any new effort to further dry the dredged ash.

"We are not planning to do anything different," McCracken said.

Federal and state environmental regulators have been only minimally involved with disposal of the landfill wastewater.

Even though coal ash contains toxic materials, it isn't considered hazardous waste.

EPA officials late last year delayed a decision whether to propose reclassifying coal ash as hazardous. Doing so would limit where it could be sent for disposal, possibly increasing the projected \$1.2 billion cleanup cost for TVA ratepayers and affecting the ability to recycle the ash into cement and building materials.

The Alabama Department of Environmental Management, which is paid \$1 for each ton of the coal ash, monitors the landfill and has found no rules violations involving its excess water, spokesman Scott Hughes said.

He said there are no restrictions on where the landfill sends the drained water, even to other states, as long as recipients have proper permits to treat it.

In Demopolis, about 20 miles from Uniontown, officials failed to renew their wastewater treatment operating permit but the wastewater plant has continued receiving the landfill's drained fluids while operating under a special state order.

Hughes said Thursday that new orders propose additional monitoring of the wastewater at the landfill and allow Demopolis to accept it. If arsenic and other pollutant concentration levels meet standards, he said, there is no limit to how much landfill wastewater that Demopolis can take. He said Demopolis is the only treatment plant in Alabama currently taking the [landfill](#) wastewater.

An attorney for the Demopolis wastewater system, Woodford "Woody" Dinning Jr., said the shipments are being tested on arrival.

David Ludder, Tallahassee, Fla.-based environmental attorney who represents Gibbs and other neighbors, said, "ADEM recovers a good bit of money off that [coal ash](#). They get a fee for every ton of ash that gets disposed of there. EPA has a vested interest because they have to get the spill cleaned up in Tennessee and they can't do it without a place to put the ash."

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