

Duke to provide water to NC residents with tainted wells

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In this April 25, 2014, file photo, Bryant Gobble, left, hugs his wife, Sherry Gobble, right, as they look from their yard across an ash pond full of dead trees toward Duke Energy's Buck Steam Station in Dukeville, N.C. Duke says it will provide bottled water to residents living near coal ash pits in North Carolina. So far, more than 150 residential wells tested near Duke's dumps have failed to meet state groundwater standards. (AP Photo/Chuck Burton, File)

Duke Energy says it will begin delivering bottled water to homeowners

living near its coal ash pits in North Carolina, even as the nation's largest electricity company denies responsibility for its neighbors' tainted wells.

So far, more than 150 residential wells tested near Duke's dumps have failed to meet state groundwater standards, and residents have been advised not to use their water for drinking or cooking. Many of the results showed worrying levels of such toxic heavy metals as vanadium and hexavalent chromium—both of which can be contained in coal ash.

The decision comes as Duke is scheduled to plead guilty Thursday to nine environmental crimes as part of a negotiated settlement with federal prosecutors requiring it to pay \$102 million in fines and restitution.

Duke's pledge to provide clean water to the affected residents is welcome news to Sherry Gobble, who lives with her husband and two young children on a plot of land adjacent to Duke's Buck Steam Station.

Her home's drinking well is about 250 feet from the largest of the three open-air coal ash pits at Buck, which together cover 134 acres and contain more than 5 million tons of ash. Nationally, there are more than 1,100 such dumps, most located near aging coal-fired power plants.

As The Associated Press reported in June, a round of private testing conducted by the environmental group Waterkeeper Alliance found worrying levels of heavy metals in the wells of Gobble and several of her neighbors in Dukeville, a close-knit rural hamlet named for the large number residents who worked at the nearby power plant.

Ever since, Gobble has been using bottled water for everything from making coffee to bathing her children. The family goes through about 40 one-gallon plastic jugs each week.

"It takes a lot out of you to haul that water every week—in and out, in

and out," Gobble said. "I'm so tired of hauling water."

According to the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Gobble's well contains hexavalent chromium at more than 50 times the threshold set by state health officials, as well as vanadium at nine times the state's allowed groundwater limit.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says hexavalent chromium is likely to be carcinogenic when ingested. The International Agency for Research on Cancer has determined that vanadium is "possibly carcinogenic to humans." Studies show lab animals exposed to high oral doses of vanadium suffered neurological and developmental problems.

Duke had previously said its own sampling showed no problems with residential wells in Dukeville.

A new state law, passed last year in the wake of a massive spill of coal ash at Duke's Dan River Steam Station, required all residential wells located within 1,000 feet of one of the company's coal ash pits to be tested by independent labs.

Of the wells tested through the end of April, more than 93 percent failed to meet state groundwater standards. Duke was among those who got a warning letter from state health officials. The well supplying the Buck plant tested higher than state groundwater standards for antimony, a potentially harmful metal found in coal ash.

Duke has for years supplied bottled water to its employees at the plant, and recently began deliveries to a nearby family whose well contained 86 times the state standard for vanadium.

Duke spokeswoman Erin Culbert said Tuesday the effort will be expanded statewide to include any homeowners who got a warning letter

from the state saying their wells are tainted. Culbert said the company will also consider paying to extend public water lines to the Dukeville area, which the residents have long sought.

After denying wrongdoing for years, Duke recently conceded in regulatory filings that it had identified about 200 leaks and seeps at its 32 coal ash dumps statewide that together ooze out more than 3 million gallons of contaminated wastewater each day.

Still, the company insists it is not responsible for the contamination found in the residential wells ringing its coal-fired power plants. Culbert said the contamination is likely the result of natural processes already present in local soils and rock, not the company's ash pits.

"Based on the state's test results we've reviewed thus far, we have no indication that Duke Energy plant operations have influenced neighbors' well water," Culbert said, adding that more study is needed.

Culbert said Duke simply wants to provide the homeowners "peace of mind" by providing bottled water.

Avner Vengosh, a Duke University geochemistry professor who studies coal ash contamination, agreed that the available data does not yet conclusively link Duke Energy's leaky pits to the tainted wells. But the recent testing, which he said was conducted without sufficient scientific rigor, does also not exclude Duke's dumps as the source.

"I would be very concerned if I lived there," Vengosh said. Duke University and Duke Energy are not affiliated, though both were named for the same family of North Carolina tobacco barons.

Donna Lisenby, spokeswoman for the Waterkeeper Alliance, said the new test results verify those found last year by the environmental group.

At the time, both state regulators and Duke discounted their findings.

"Instead of disputing our science and our testing, now they have their own results confirming what we've said all along: wells close to Duke's ash ponds at Buck contain heavy metals and other pollutants that are also in coal ash," Lisenby said. "At this point, I don't think anyone should trust what Duke says. They've proven time and time again that what they've said is not true."

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