

Toxic foam dumped into southern Illinois coal mine in unsuccessful attempt to extinguish underground fire

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Operators of a southern Illinois coal mine dumped toxic foam deep underground in an unsuccessful attempt to extinguish a fire that idled production last month, according to documents obtained by the Chicago Tribune.

The type of foam used by St. Louis-based Foresight Energy is being phased out in Illinois and 11 other states under laws that for the first time restrict unregulated chemicals known as PFAS—shorthand for perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances.

PFAS are a growing concern worldwide because they remain in the environment forever, linger in the blood of exposed people for years and trigger several health problems, including cancer, liver damage and decreased fertility.

One of Foresight's lawyers told [state officials](#) the foam used at the Sugar Camp complex was biodegradable and would not harm fish or wildlife. But inspectors later determined the company had pumped more than 46,000 gallons of PFAS-laden foam into the mine, raising the possibility that nearby private wells and other sources of drinking water could be contaminated.

Company officials also hired contractors to drill boreholes into the mine without a permit, records show. One of the boreholes is close to a creek where testing this month by the Illinois Environmental Protection detected high levels of PFAS.

"Potential environmental impacts are tremendous, especially if the foam is not contained," said Melanie Benesh, an attorney for the Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit organization pushing to ban the chemicals. "PFAS can seep into groundwater where it won't break down. If the contaminated groundwater is a source of drinking water, then residents may be exposed to PFAS."

Both the fire and Foresight's responses to it remained secret until a local environmental activist took pictures of foam that had drifted to above-ground ditches and farm fields near the mine entrance in Franklin County, about 270 miles southwest of Chicago.

The activist forwarded the photos to state officials and to the Tribune, which sought more details under the Freedom of Information Act.

Foresight executives did not return requests for comment. Federal and state officials declined to say anything other than the fire remains under investigation.

Portions of the mine are still smoldering, and federal mining regulators have blocked Foresight from resuming production.

Emails show the Illinois EPA didn't begin looking into potential harm to people and wildlife until Sept. 1, more than three weeks after Foresight evacuated miners at Sugar Camp.

"We should have our PFAS crew go out there to do some sampling," Sanjay Sofat, chief of the agency's Bureau of Water, wrote to colleagues.

Samples collected the next day had PFAS concentrations up to 16 times higher than state health guidelines, records show.

Foresight's use of PFAS-laden foam came a month after federal and state regulators ordered a Louisiana-based contractor to switch to safer alternatives while putting out a fire that destroyed a chemical plant near Rockford.

A lack of uniform federal or state policies reflects how regulators struggle to protect Americans from PFAS more than two decades after it became clear the chemicals pose widespread hazards to public health.

Nearly every American has PFAS in their blood, studies have found. The compounds are known largely for their use in products featuring the Teflon and Scotchgard brands, manufactured by DuPont and 3M, respectively. But dozens of related compounds are still widely used in firefighting foam, food packaging, stain- and water-resistant clothing, carpets and household products, among other things.

Foresight, one of the last coal companies operating in Illinois, declared bankruptcy last year. And yet, led by the Sugar Camp complex, the company produced more than half of the 32 million tons of coal mined in the state during 2020.

Nearly all of Foresight's coal is shipped to other states and countries. The company cuts costs by relying on longwall mining, a process that uses robotic equipment rather than people to do most of the work.

Since opening in 2008, Sugar Camp has repeatedly shown up on the U.S. EPA's list of chronic violators of the federal Clean Water Act. Five of the 16 Illinois miners killed on the job since 2008 worked at the mine, where the injury rate exceeded the national average at times during the past decade.

The mine also is a major source of heat-trapping pollution scrambling the earth's climate. Burning Foresight's coal in power plants and factories released more carbon dioxide last year than the heat-trapping emissions from all 4.6 million automobiles registered in Illinois.

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