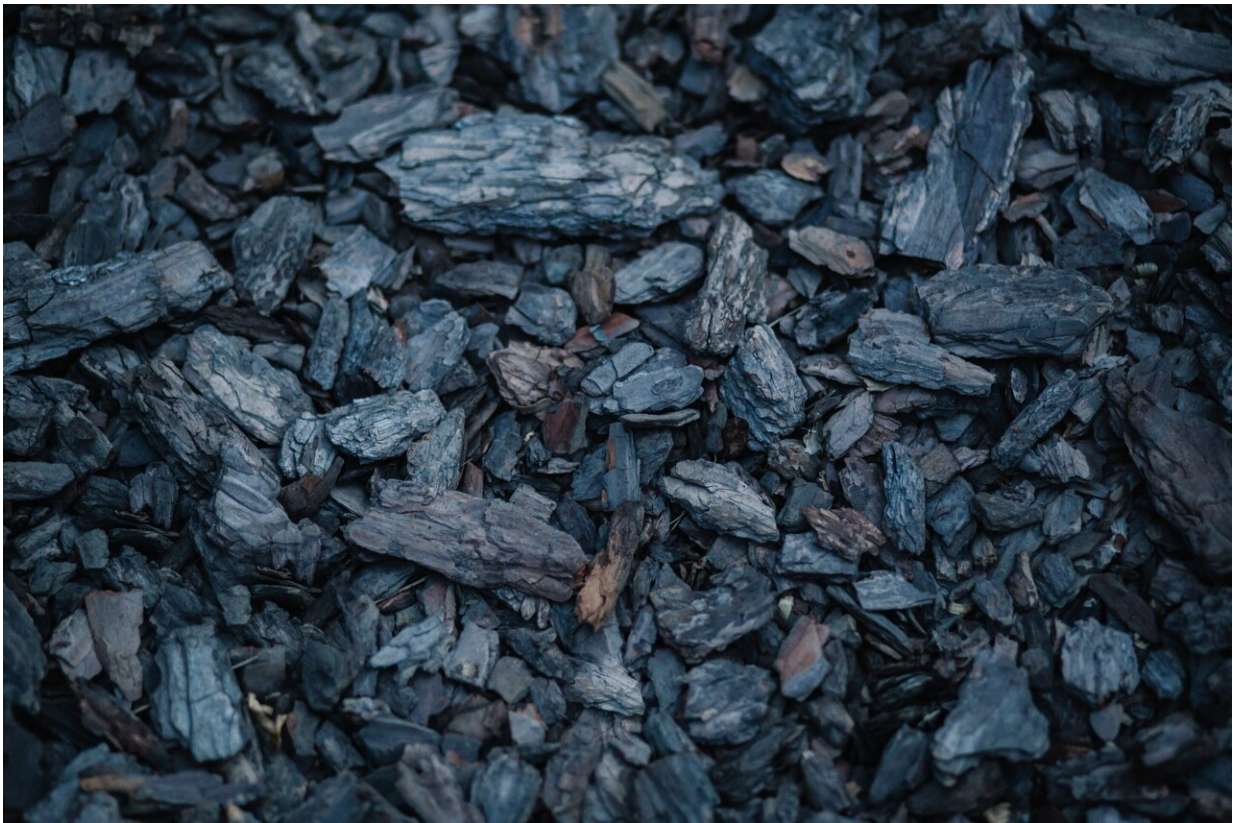


# Maryland sites are among the most polluting coal ash waste dumps in the nation, study finds

November 7 2022, by Christine Condon

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A coal ash waste dump in Prince George's County is among the most polluting in the nation, according to a new report from environmental

groups.

Two other Maryland coal ash waste dumps are cited in the report, in Montgomery County and Baltimore City, but the Prince George's site, located in Brandywine, was ranked far above them. It was considered the 7th worst such site in the U.S.

The report, authored by researchers from the Environmental Integrity Project and Earthjustice, drew from publicly available pollution data to assess dumps for coal ash, the waste left behind by burning coal for electricity.

Coal ash waste, which includes toxic metals and other pollutants with the potential to harm [human health](#) and the environment, is one of the nation's biggest sources of industrial pollution, though coal burning has declined in recent years, according to the report. In Maryland, many of the sites were owned originally by large utilities such as BGE and PEPCO, and accepted waste from their [coal-fired power plants](#) nearby, but have been sold in recent decades.

In 2015, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency established the first regulations for coal ash, banning the storage of ash waste in leaking or unlined ponds, and requiring the industry to monitor groundwater for contamination and clean up contaminated sites.

"The first goal has been partly achieved, as most [coal plants](#) no longer send coal ash to leaking or unlined ash ponds," reads the report released Thursday. "But this report shows that the other goals of the Coal Ash Rule have been thwarted by the utility industry's widespread violation of federal law."

The report found that 91% of U.S. coal ash sites are causing unsafe levels of groundwater contamination based on their own data, just as in

the previous study by the [environmental groups](#) in 2019. Arsenic, which is known to cause cancer and other health defects after long-term exposure in drinking water, is the most common culprit, according to the report, but other toxic chemicals, such as boron, lithium, molybdenum and sulfate also were common.

At about half of the polluting coal plants named in the report, operators have denied responsibility for the contamination and are not creating a cleanup plan, according to the report. The other half of facilities have submitted some sort of cleanup plan. But many of them simply identified different options for cleanup without committing to one, according to the report.

Only 4% of the facilities plan to actually treat groundwater to eliminate pollutants, according to the report.

The report recommended greater federal oversight of coal ash waste sites and the addition of enforceable cleanup deadlines, plus greater monitoring of drinking water near coal ash sites.

In January, the Environmental Protection Agency announced it had taken steps to put several facilities on notice about compliance with the Coal Ash Rule.

The Brandywine Ash Management Facility, operated by GenOn Energy Holdings, reported detecting 222 times the safe amount of lithium in its groundwater, 111 times the safe amount of molybdenum and five times the safe amount of arsenic—among other overages, according to the report.

Brandywine has long been cited by environmental advocates as a poster child for environmental racism. The small, majority-Black community hosts a number of power plants and a Superfund site, a hazardous waste

site prioritized for cleanup by the federal government.

The coal ash report found that about 70% of the coal ash ponds in or dangerously close to groundwater are located in lower income neighborhoods or communities of color.

At the Brandywine facility, researchers found that GenOn has skirted the requirements of EPA's Coal Ash Rule by "pretending that there are multiple landfills where there is in fact a single landfill."

The Coal Ash Rule only applies to landfills that still were receiving coal ash in October of 2015.

"They carved it up into a bunch of what they call cells," said Abel Russ, a researcher with the Environmental Integrity Project who helped prepare the report. "The ones that they have stopped adding ash to before 2015, they decided those were inactive and they're not covered by the rule."

GenOn, based in Houston, did not respond Thursday to a request for comment on the study. In 2013, the company entered into a consent decree with the state over its coal ash landfills, and was fined.

The researchers also found that GenOn was failing to adequately monitor the [groundwater contamination](#). Instead of comparing its groundwater wells to a background well unaffected by contamination, GenOn looks at each groundwater well in isolation, to determine whether its contamination levels are increasing or decreasing, Russ said.

"They ask whether it's getting worse over time, which is interesting information in an academic sense, but it's not what the rule is asking," Russ said.

A second GenOn facility in Maryland also made the researchers' list. The Westland Ash Management Facility in Dickerson, about 15 miles south of Frederick on the Potomac River, reported detecting 30 times the safe level of molybdenum in its groundwater, 21 times the safe level of lithium and six times the safe level of selenium, among other overages.

Researchers determined that facility has issued a list of possible cleanup plans, but has yet to select its final plan, Russ said.

Maryland's third facility on the list is located on Hawkins Point in South Baltimore, just north of the city line with Anne Arundel County. The Fort Armistead Road facility reported unsafe levels of certain contaminants, but those levels were actually lower than at a well upstream of the landfill, which would mean the source of the contamination may not be the [coal ash](#).

It's also possible, however, that the upstream well also was contaminated, making it a poor choice for comparison, Russ said.

The contamination levels at the Fort Armistead facility also were lower than at many others in the study. Some of the numbers, including for cobalt, were just above the safe threshold, Russ said.

That site is managed by Allentown, Pennsylvania-based Talen Energy, which did not respond Thursday to a request for comment.

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