

EPA decision in Alabama raises questions about Georgia Power's coal ash

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Like many other utilities, Georgia Power's days of burning coal for electricity are dwindling.

Just 12 years ago, 62% of the company's [power](#) supply came from coal. By 2028, it's likely to have just one coal-fired power plant remaining in the state.

Even as it moves away from coal, Georgia Power is still grappling with how to remediate the lakes of toxic ash produced by decades of burning coal around the state. Now, a proposed action by the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in Alabama is leading to fresh scrutiny of Georgia Power's own waste management plans.

Here's what you need to know about the government's move and what it could mean for Georgia Power's own coal ash cleanup.

What is coal ash?

Coal ash is a dust-like byproduct of burning coal in power plants. To keep the material from blowing away, utilities often store the waste in watery lagoons known as ash ponds.

Coal ash can be safely repurposed as an ingredient in concrete, but it contains dangerous heavy metals like lead, mercury, cadmium and arsenic, which are known to cause cancer and other serious illnesses, according to the EPA. If left sitting in groundwater or in contact with other bodies of water, it can pose serious risks to human health and the environment.

How many ash ponds does Georgia Power have?

Georgia Power has 29 ash ponds at 11 sites around the state in various states of construction and decommissioning. The company also has 12 landfills used for storing ash.

At some ash pond sites, the company is drying out the waste, excavating it and transporting it to lined landfills or selling it for use in building materials. But at several locations, the company wants to cap the ash in place, sometimes with it in contact with groundwater.

At Plant Hammond near Rome, Plant McDonough south of Vinings, Plant Scherer outside Macon and Plant Yates near Newnan, Georgia Power plans to cap and permanently store millions of cubic feet of coal ash in unlined pits with material submerged in groundwater. Environmentalists say that risks contaminating the water supplies surrounding communities rely on.

How is coal ash managed in Georgia?

In Georgia, coal ash oversight is the responsibility of the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD). That's because Georgia is one of only three states allowed by the [federal government](#) to oversee the closure of its own ash ponds. The two others are Oklahoma and Texas.

For a state to gain approval to manage ash pond closures, the EPA requires that its program is "at least as protective as federal regulations currently in place."

What does Alabama have to do with this?

Alabama had applied to join Georgia, Oklahoma and Texas in managing its own coal ash program. But last week, the EPA—which has taken a more aggressive approach to enforcing coal ash regulations under President Joe Biden—put the kibosh on those plans.

The agency announced Friday it plans to reject Alabama's application after finding that the state's program is "significantly" less protective

than federal rules require.

Specifically, EPA said ponds cannot be closed with coal ash in contact with groundwater, and it found that Alabama's permitting does not require facilities to adequately prevent and monitor for groundwater infiltration. Federal regulations say that coal ash ponds must be closed in a manner that controls, minimizes or eliminates contamination of groundwater to the "maximum extent feasible."

Several of the ash ponds at issue in the state are owned by Georgia Power's sister company, Alabama Power.

What does that mean for Georgia?

For years, [environmental groups](#) have condemned Georgia Power's plans as dangerous and potentially in violation of federal rules. Now, they say the Alabama decision is more evidence that Georgia EPD needs to force the company to change course.

"If you leave the ash in contact with groundwater, it does not meet the federal standards," said Fletcher Sams, executive director of the Altamaha Riverkeeper.

Questioned about its plans, Georgia Power spokesman Jacob Hawkins said the company was aware of the Alabama decision and would continue to work with Georgia EPD to ensure it complies with federal rules. He added that the company is "committed to closure plans that are protective of the environment and the communities we serve."

While the Alabama determination is significant, it's not the first time the EPA has signaled that Georgia Power's plans may be inadequate.

In January 2022, the EPA sent a letter to Georgia EPD asking the agency

to review pending or issued ash pond permits to ensure they meet [federal standards](#). The EPA pointed to a then-proposed decision involving an ash pond in Ohio, which the agency said had material sitting in groundwater. Late last year, the EPA formally denied that facility's request to continue dumping coal ash in its unlined pond.

Frank Holleman, a senior attorney for the Southern Environmental Law Center, said the message to Georgia EPD is clear.

"What the EPA has said is that you're not following the national standards if you allow [coal](#) ash to sit in groundwater in unlined pits when you issue permits," Holleman said. "Anybody who can read the English language knows this is what the rule requires," he added later.

What happens next?

It was not immediately clear whether Georgia EPD will require Georgia Power to adjust its plans.

So far, EPD has released only one draft permit to a facility in Georgia where ash would remain in groundwater after closure. That's at Plant Hammond.

In a statement, Georgia EPD spokeswoman Sara Lips said the agency would continue evaluating each permit to "ensure they meet the performance criteria established in the rules."

"EPD will also continue to work with EPA to ensure all issued permits are protective of human health and the environment," she added. Lips did not directly respond to a question asking if the agency thinks Georgia Power's proposed [coal ash](#) closures comply with federal rules.

The EPA said in a statement that it is "engaged in productive dialog on

closure strategies" with Georgia EPD.

"EPA is committed to our partnership with Georgia and to pursuing our shared goals of protecting groundwater from contamination and ensuring robust protections for communities," the agency added.

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