

2024's Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA'S WATER



COOSA RIVER

Plan for Coal Ash Cleanup Pollutes Groundwater, Threatens Coosa River

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) gave Georgia's Environmental Protection Division (EPD) the authority to oversee the cleanup of millions of tons of toxic coal ash stored in unlined pits at power plants across the state, it did so with the understanding that state authorities would ensure any cleanup complied with federal standards. Foremost among those standards: coal ash could not be left in place where it could contaminate groundwater. Instead of complying with these standards, EPD in September 2023 agreed to allow Georgia Power Company to leave some one million tons of coal ash in an unlined landfill at Plant Hammond, a now retired 70-year-old power plant on the banks of the Coosa River just west of Rome. Now, state regulators find themselves in hot water. In February, EPA informed EPD that the closure plan for Plant Hammond failed to meet federal standards, noting that groundwater beneath the Hammond ash pond was in direct contact with the toxic waste. While Georgia faces off with the feds, state regulators and power utilities elsewhere have largely abandoned "cap-in-place" cleanups and are moving their coal ash to lined storage facilities.

THE WATER BODY

The upper Coosa River basin is considered one of North America's most biologically unique river basins with 30 endemic aquatic species, and the Coosa River in particular is unique because it is one of only a handful of locations in the country where land-locked striped bass still spawn. The Coosa River in Georgia also feeds Weiss Lake in Alabama, located just downstream from Plant Hammond's discharge. The 30,200-acre Alabama Power reservoir is the economic calling card for Centre, Alabama and Cherokee County. Tourism associated with the lake is the county's primary industry, with an economic impact of \$250 million annually. The lake also serves as the primary drinking water source for residents of Centre and Gadsden.



Located in the far left of this photo, Ash Pond 3 now appears as a 25-acre grassy mound along Ga. 20 in the foreground. It looms over Pisgah Baptist Church to the west and Cabin Creek to the east. It appears benign, but in fact, beneath the surface coal ash extends some 44-feet deep and ten feet below the upper limit of the groundwater table.

THE DIRT

The legacy of decades of dependence on coal-burning power plants for our electrical supply has left Georgia with an expensive and dangerous waste disposal problem. The contaminants found in coal ash include substances that cause cancer and impair brain function in children; Georgia Power estimates the cost of cleaning up its 29 ash disposal sites at some \$8 billion. At 19 of those sites the company is excavating the ash and removing it to lined landfills, but at the remaining sites the company wants to keep the ash in unlined storage where toxins can come in direct contact with groundwater.

These plans leave both groundwater and surface water at risk, and EPD has been complicit in allowing these inadequate cleanup plans to move forward, despite objections from federal regulators. EPA now says the EPD-approved plan for Ash Pond 3 at Plant Hammond does not pass muster.

In a February letter to EPD, Jeneanne Gettles, acting EPA Regional Administrator, wrote: "The Agency is unaware of a circumstance where these standards could be, or have been, met when the waste in a closed, unlined impoundment remains in contact with groundwater that freely migrates in and out of the [coal ash] remaining in the closed unit."

The "unit" in question now appears as a 25-acre grassy mound along a busy four-lane highway, looming over Pisgah Baptist Church to the west and Cabin Creek to the east. It appears benign, but in fact, beneath the surface coal ash extends some 44-feet deep and ten feet below the upper limit of the groundwater table. Water tests around the Ash Pond 3 show levels of the toxin molybdenum exceeding state groundwater protection standards.

Equally troubling is the pond's location adjacent to Cabin Creek and within the Coosa River's 100-year floodplain. During such a event, floodwaters will rise above the base of the storage area, infiltrate and move contaminants into both surface and ground water while creating the possibility of a catastrophic breach of the embankments surrounding the stored coal ash. A scenario that would send toxic ash spilling into the Coosa.

In other southern states, regulators and utilities alike have abandoned efforts to "cap-in-place" coal ash left in unlined storage basins. In North Carolina, after years of fighting regulators in court, Duke Energy agreed to excavate all its coal ash to approved landfills. Likewise in South Carolina, utilities have agreed to excavate all unlined ash pits along the state's rivers, and in Virginia, a politically-divided state legislature passed legislation requiring that coal ash kept in unlined storage units be removed to lined landfills.

When it comes to coal ash, however, Georgia's legislature has been impotent. Despite repeated bills introduced by legislative champions to protect drinking water from this legacy pollution, these measures have all died for lack of support from state leadership.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

EPD must reject "cap-in-place" cleanup plans and force Georgia Power to remove coal ash to safe storage areas. If EPD continues to issue permits that do not meet federal requirements, EPA must revoke Georgia's authority to manage this dangerous waste.



Located on the Coosa River west of Rome, the now shuttered Plant Hammond, a coal-fired power plant, was home to four coal ash ponds. Ash in three of those ponds is slated to be dewatered and moved off site to lined landfills. A final ash pond has been capped in place. That pond holds some one million tons of coal ash that is in contact with groundwater.



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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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