

A HIDDEN

# COST OF COAL

## COAL ASH IN MONTANA



**Northern Plains Resource Council's campaign to protect groundwater and stop the spread of hazardous coal ash**

**In the Google Earth photo at left, the first coal ash pond built at Colstrip in the 1970s can be seen in the upper left near homes in the southeastern Montana community. At the same elevation, in the middle of the photo, is the surge pond from which the city draws its drinking water.**

In 2009, the Environmental Protective Agency (EPA) listed the coal ash waste ponds near the power plant in Colstrip, Montana, among the top 50 most hazardous in the U.S. because of their likelihood to fail and harm people living nearby. What the EPA did not mention in their listing is that the ash ponds are already a hazard and have already been leaking for an unknown number of years into residents' wells. In 2003, 57 residents filed a lawsuit against PPL Montana for the contamination of their wells. The case was eventually settled out of court for \$25 million in 2008. However, the case didn't resolve the fact that the ash ponds are still leaking and will continue to do so until they are drained and relined. So far, however, PPL Montana, with the approval of the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, has avoided stopping the leaking ash ponds and is instead negotiating an agreement to let the ponds leak. Their current plans entail continuously pumping the contaminated water back into the ponds without addressing the source of the problem.

## What is coal ash?

Burning coal is dangerous to people's health. One of the hazardous byproducts of burning coal is coal ash. Coal ash, or coal combustion waste, constitutes the second largest waste product in the United States after household trash. Coal ash comes in a number of forms, the main two being fly ash and bottom ash. Fly ash is an extremely fine powder that can be disposed of in either dry storage such as landfills or wet storage such as ponds or impoundments. Bottom ash is the heavy particles left in the boiler after the coal is burned.

## How can it affect me?

Coal ash contains numerous heavy metals and chemicals that can damage human health. The heavy metals include arsenic, lead, and mercury, the health effects of which include an increase in the risk of skin cancer, lung cancer, liver cancer, and lymphatic cancer, as well as brain and kidney damage.

## Coal ash pond fails

Coal ash came to the nation's attention when in 2008 a Kingston, Tennessee, coal ash pond failed and released 45,000 pounds of arsenic, 49,000 pounds of lead, and various other heavy metals. The spill contaminated approximately 300 acres and damaged a number of homes. Fortunately, no one was injured by the spill but the contamination is expected to take years to clean up, and it is impossible to tell how the long-term effects will play out.

# CONTAMINATION WIDESPREAD



**The Corette coal-fired power plant in Billings produces approximately 32,000 tons of coal ash each year and within this coal ash are 38 tons of heavy metals.**

## Coal ash unregulated

Coal ash has extremely poor federal regulations and the State of Montana has exempted it from the solid waste management law. At the Hardin Generation Station in Hardin, the coal ash is dumped in the landfill.

In Colstrip, the fly ash is mixed with water and slurried to two coal ash ponds. Both of these ponds are currently leaking, and one has been leaking since 1979.

At the J.E. Corette Power Plant in Billings, which is also owned by PPL Montana, water from the bottom ash system is discharged into the Yellowstone River. The state's wastewater permit for this discharge does not regulate toxic metals.

**Keep informed!  
Take action!  
Join** 

Northern Plains Resource Council is a conservation and family agriculture group that organizes Montana citizens to protect our water quality, family farms and ranches, and unique quality of life.

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[www.northernplains.org](http://www.northernplains.org)

## What you can do

■ The EPA is considering declaring coal ash a hazardous substance, and you can help. This should have been done 10 years ago when the hazards of coal ash were identified. Sadly, it often takes a disaster like the Tennessee spill to move agencies to take action. Please comment to the EPA and let them know that you don't want a disaster in Montana.

■ Tell the EPA that coal ash is a health hazard and the communities that live nearby should not have to bear the impacts so that power plants can make an extra buck. Coal ash needs to be declared hazardous and listed under Subtitle C of the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA). Comments can be submitted by email or mail.

### By email:

[rcra-docket@epa.gov](mailto:rcra-docket@epa.gov)

Attention Docket ID No. EPA-HQ-RCRA-2009-0640

**By mail** (please include two copies of your comments):

Environmental Protection Agency,

Hazardous Waste Management System

Identification and Listing of Special Wastes, Disposal of Coal

Combustion Residuals from Electric Utilities Docket

Attention: Docket ID No. EPA-HQ-RCRA-2009-0640

Mailcode: 5305T, 1200 Pennsylvania Ave NW

Washington, DC 20460

### Sources:

**Tennessee Valley spill** – [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/30/us/30sludge.html?\\_r=2&adxnml=1&ref=us&adxnmlx=1230643581-iR57BPGPJN1g0739+rLLKg](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/30/us/30sludge.html?_r=2&adxnml=1&ref=us&adxnmlx=1230643581-iR57BPGPJN1g0739+rLLKg)

**Health effects** – <http://www.lennotech.com/periodic/elements/as.htm#ixzz0tDrToDT2>

**Colstrip national hazard ranking** – <http://www.epa.gov/osw/nonhaz/industrial/special/fossil/surveys2/>

**Corette bottom ash** – Contaminated Coal Waste: Data & Projections for Existing and Proposed U.S. Coal-Fired Power Plants; [www.nrdc.org/energy/coalwaste/MT.asp](http://www.nrdc.org/energy/coalwaste/MT.asp)



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