

Protections against toxic coal ash residue must be strengthened, not weakened

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EPA's current proposal to retract well-justified regulation of toxic coal-ash ponds and landfill disposal of coal-ash residue, if adopted, would increase grave hazards to public health and the environment. Such backsliding would flagrantly contradict the very purpose of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Proponents of the roll-backs claim they would save up to \$100 million a year in compliance costs for the industries that generate coal-ash toxins in profit-making operations. Compared to the overall operating costs of such activities the alleged savings would be negligible.

Conversely, the risks to public health and private property would be enormous if regulations are weakened. Toxins in coal ash are known to cause cancer, and documentation provides credible evidence of the suffering imposed when waterways and fisheries are contaminated by coal-ash residue.

Considering the nation's vast population exposed to coal ash, the high costs of medical treatment, and environmental damage, surely the annual risks to the public far exceed any claimed savings by industry. According to Physicians for Social Responsibility, reporting six years ago, there [were] a total of 157 damage cases [against industry] – 90 identified by the Environmental Integrity Project and its partners, and 67 identified by EPA. [See: <http://www.psr.org/environment-and-health/environmental-health-policy-institute/responses/coal-ash-the-toxic-legacy.html> .]

Preventing toxic coal-ash contaminants from public exposure is imperative. This means not only enforcing existing rules governing the location, operation, and monitoring of coal-ash ponds and landfill disposal of coal-ash residue, but – to the contrary – strengthening legal safeguards.

Mandatory, universal requirements for protecting the public from coal-ash pollution must be rigorously enforced. This means that states must not be allowed to deviate from meeting specific minimum standards for storing, transporting, and depositing coal ash, and for dependably monitoring surrounding areas to prevent hazards to the public.

Moreover, protective buffers separating coal-ash ponds and landfill disposal areas from wetlands and water resources - above and below the ground - must be increased to help reduce risks to public health.

Undoubtedly, it would be prudent and in the national interest to revitalize the role of EPA in protecting the public and environmental health instead of allowing the agency's mission to be manipulated to defend the profit-margins of industries that produce toxic waste.

We must not allow our nation's disadvantaged areas to become "sacrifice zones," where vulnerable communities suffer the harsh burdens of weakly regulated industries that generate hazardous toxins.

Cutting corners in America's environmental protection, as proposed in EPA's regulatory rollback, is a fool's bargain.

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