Cleaning Up the South: The Legacy of Coal Ash
Coal Ash Ponds Are On Most Major Southeastern Rivers

Legend:
- ASH: Active SELC Coal Ash Case
- ASH: Coal Ash Pond(s) - No Active Case

*River basins colored white have no coal ash pond.

Map created by Jovian Sackett (jsackett@selcnc.org) | Last updated: March 03, 2015
SCE&G to clean up toxic ash near plant

It agrees to remove coal waste from Lower Richland by 2020

By SAMMY FRETWELL sfretwell@thestate.com

Over the next eight years, SCE&G will dig up and remove more than 2 million tons of coal sludge that has contaminated groundwater in Lower Richland County and leaked arsenic into the Wateree River near Congaree National Park.

Environmental groups and the utility have struck an accord that requires SCE&G to clean out all of the coal ash now resting in waste ponds adjacent to the company’s 42-year-old Wateree power station, a coal-burning plant with a legacy of air and water pollution.

The agreement, announced Monday, settles a lawsuit by the Catawba Riverkeeper Foundation. SCE&G has in the past struck several deals with state regulators to address pollution leaching from its ash ponds, but the settlement for the first time includes binding requirements that SCE&G get rid of the 2.4 million tons of coal ash by late 2020.

The ash will be removed a year ahead of a nonbinding date agreed upon last year by SCE&G and the

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COAL PLANT

S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control. The settlement also includes an interim deadline to clean up 240,000 tons of coal ash by 2015.

Coal ash, the waste material from burning coal at power plants, has historically been dumped in man-made ponds, many of which were not lined with plastic or some other synthetic material.

The ash contains arsenic and other toxins that, in some cases, leaked into groundwater or spilled into rivers and across the landscape. SCE&G’s Lower Richland plant is among those that have leaked arsenic — an ancient poison and suspected carcinogen — into both groundwater and the Wateree River upstream from the national park.

Environmentalists bemoaned the accord Monday, saying it could influence other power companies to clean up coal ash ponds that threaten the environment.

“This is a model for utilities in the region,” said Frank Holleman, an attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center, which handled the suit.

Notable is Santee Cooper, the state-owned utility that at one point had more coal ash ponds than any other power company in South Carolina. The company had about half of the approximately 30 coal-ash ponds in the state, as of 2010.

Like SCE&G, Santee Cooper also has been sued by environmental groups seeking to close coal ash lagoons at its Gingrauger power station in Conway, but it is continuing to fight the legal action. The Gingrauger lagoons are prone to leak and are in a low-lying area that is perilously close to the Waccamaw River, environmentalists say.

Environmentalists also said they hoped Duke Energy would heed SCE&G’s plan and close four “high-hazard” ash ponds on the Catawba River in North Carolina. The Catawba River drains into Lake Wateree just above the Wateree River near Camden.

“This agreement and SCE&G’s commitments are a major step forward for the protection of the Catawba-Wateree basin,” said Rick Costakis, the riverkeeper for the basin, which covers both Carolinas.

“The Catawba Riverkeeper Foundation filed the lawsuit against SCE&G in January after Holleman’s organization uncovered what it said was a quid pro quo agreement between DHEC and the power company to address the discharge and move toward a cleanup. But the agreement did not force a cleanup and allowed SCE&G to get out of the deal at any time.

Last winter’s lawsuit said the banks of the Wateree River were eroding toward SCE&G’s ponds and that a break in a pond wall could result in catastrophic pollution to the Wateree River. The utility’s coal-fired power plant is about three miles upstream from Congaree National Park. Congaree is the only national park in South Carolina.

Last week’s settlement, however, does not require SCE&G to clean up groundwater already polluted with arsenic at levels many times the safe drinking water standard. Ash produced in the future in Richland County where people drink from wells. The suit had asked aides to order SCE&G to clean up the groundwater.

Although the contamination is not known to have escaped the site, local Richland farmer Heath Hill said he’d like to see more done. Hill’s lawsuit against a landfill at the SCE&G power plant uncovered evidence of arsenic draining into the Wateree River.

“To me, they should be made to clean it up,” Hill said of the power company. “They are the ones who put that stuff there. We know who is doing this.”

Robert Yant, a spokesman for SCE&G, said contamination in the groundwater should dissipate as the source of the pollution — coal ash — is removed. According to the agreement, SCE&G also must excavate and remove at least 2 feet of polluted soil below the bottom of the main ash waste lagoon.

Ash dug up from the waste ponds will be disposed of in the landfill Hill opposes. Ash produced in the future will also go into the landfill or recycled for use in pavement or other materials, the power company says.

Yant and company officials said SCE&G has been moving to clean up the coal ash, and Monday’s agreement underscores that commitment.

“From our voluntary agreement with DHEC a year ago to our affirmation of that agreement in our settlement with the Catawba Riverkeeper Foundation today, SCE&G continues to demonstrate its commitment to efficiently and effectively decommission wet ash storage facilities at all of our coal-fired stations,” said Jim Landreth, vice president for SCE&G Fossil and Hydro Operations.

The power company, which as recently as two years ago still had five ash ponds, says it is moving to close all of its coal ash lagoons. SCE&G closed the one at its McMeans station on Lake Murray about 10 years ago, and in 2011, shut down a pond at its Uquhart station near Aiken, Yant said. The company’s Camden station near Waterville also will switch from waste lagoons to a landfill for disposal of coal ash, he said.

SCE&G’s closing of coal ash ponds comes as a federal rule is taking effect that is phasing back the use of coal-fired power plants in the wake of concerns about ash pollution.

Leaks and spills from coal ash waste ponds have become an issue of concern for communities across the country since a massive December 2008 spill in Tennessee. That spill sent a wave of polluted coal ash waste into the Emory River, releasing heavy metals into the waterway.

In addition to toxic effects on people who drink polluted water, past studies have shown that exposure by wildlife to coal ash can cause deformities. Tadpoles found living in old coal ash basins at the Savannah River Site near Aiken had deformed mouths from exposure to selenium, researchers at SRS found in the mid-1990s. Fish also were identified with abnormally curved spines at SRS.

In the past 45 years, leaks and spills from coal lagoons have caused some $2.3 billion in damage to fish and wildlife, according to a recent report by researchers with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Forest Service. Today, the federal government is trying to decide whether to regulate coal ash as a hazardous waste.
The Santee Cooper Grainger Generating Station ash ponds are on the right side of this 2008 photo. The canal in the center of the photo connects with the Waccamaw River just downriver from the Conway Marina. The water at the bottom of the photo is Lake Busbee.

TOM MURRAY

CONWAY — Santee Cooper’s decision to remove 1.3 million tons of coal ash from ponds near its Grainger electric generating plant here led to the settlement of three lawsuits filed against the state-owned utility by environmental groups.

The utility announced Tuesday that will remove the ash from those ponds and others at its Winyah and Jefferies plants – located in Georgetown County and Moncks Corner, respectively – over the next 10 years to 15 years and recycle them through two contracts that have already been signed as well as by a $40 million coal ash recycling facility to be built in Georgetown.
72. Defendant’s exceedances of the groundwater standards for Thallium at the compliance boundary of the Ash Pond Treatment System at the Asheville Plant are violations of the groundwater standards as prohibited by N.C. ADMIN. CODE tit. 15A, r. 2L.0103(d).

73. Defendant’s unpermitted seeps from the Asheville plant are violations of N.C. Gen. Stat. §§ 143-215.1(a)(1) and (a)(6).

77. Defendant’s continued operation of the Asheville Plant in violation of the groundwater standards and N.C. Gen. Stat. §143-215.1(a)(1) and (a)(6), without assessing the problem and taking corrective action poses a serious danger to the health, safety and welfare of the people of the State of North Carolina and serious harm to the water resources of the State.
‘Serious danger’ looms at lake; erase it

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Right next to Charlotte’s drinking water supply sit two giant lagoons. Stagnating in these lagoons are nearly 3 million tons of muck. The muck is ash from Duke Energy’s nearby coal-burning power plant, and it contains chemicals such as arsenic, cobalt, manganese, iron and boron.

Environmental groups say — and Duke Energy concedes — that chemicals are seeping out of the lagoons and into Mountain Island Lake.

Duke says it’s a small amount and no big deal.

The state of North Carolina says otherwise. The state added Duke’s Riverbend plant to an existing lawsuit last week. Pushed by environmental groups, the state contends that contamination from Duke’s lagoons, if not addressed, “poses a serious danger to the health, safety and welfare of the people of North Carolina and serious harm to the water resources of the state.”

This is a welcome development for anyone at all nervous about storing poisonous coal ash in perpetuity next to a lake that supplies drinking water to some 800,000 people. The suit should prompt Duke to do the right thing, which would be to remove the ash and store it in a lined landfill away from the water supply. That is what South Carolina Electric & Gas is doing with 2.4 million tons of coal ash.
DUKE ENERGY
COAL ASH DISCHARGE

MOUNTAIN ISLAND LAKE
Thousands say no to Duke Energy's coal-ash settlement

By Bruce Henderson

Public sentiment is heavily against a proposed settlement of coal-ash lawsuits filed by North Carolina environmental regulators against Duke Energy.

The state sought injunctions against Duke earlier this year for water contaminated by ash at its Riverbend power plant west of Charlotte and its Asheville plant.

In a settlement proposed in July, Duke agreed to assess the sources and extent of contamination and pay a $99,000 fine. A Wake County Superior Court judge will rule on the proposal once it’s presented in final form.

But the verdict is already in from the court of public opinion: No deal.

Virtually all the 4,939 comments filed before an Aug. 14 deadline opposed the settlement or urged the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources to hold a hearing on it.