



South Carolina Groundwater Contamination Plummetts after Coal Ash Removal

CHAPEL HILL, N.C.—According to a January 29, 2016 report, groundwater contamination has dramatically declined along the Catawba-Wateree River after coal ash removal by South Carolina utility South Carolina Electric and Gas. Under a settlement negotiated by the Southern Environmental Law Center on behalf of the Catawba Riverkeeper, SCE&G agreed to remove the coal ash from its Wateree facility on the banks of the Catawba-Wateree River near Columbia, South Carolina, upstream of the Congaree National Park. The coal ash is being moved to a lined landfill away from the river where it is stored dry.

In its latest report, SCE&G announces that it has now removed over 876,000 tons of coal ash from the site, or about one-third of the coal ash. At the same time, groundwater contamination at the site has plummeted. In one monitoring well, arsenic had contaminated the groundwater at 432 ppb, or 43 times the legal limit. In the latest report, arsenic groundwater contamination has dropped to 2.9 ppb, or a 99 percent decrease. In another monitoring well, arsenic contamination was over 1000 ppb, ranging as high as 5000 ppb. In the latest report, arsenic contamination had dropped to 58.6 ppb, or at least a 95 percent reduction in arsenic contamination. Arsenic contamination has been the principal groundwater concern at the Wateree site. Other pollutants, including lead, cadmium, and sulfate, are also reported at lower levels.

“These results confirm that when you remove the polluting coal ash, you also eliminate pollution of groundwater,” said Frank Holleman, senior attorney for the Southern Environmental Law Center. “Duke Energy and North Carolina’s Department of Environmental Quality must wake up to this reality, learn from South Carolina, and move all of Duke Energy’s polluting coal ash from unlined waterfront pits to safe dry lined storage. Otherwise, North Carolina’s groundwater will be polluted for years to come.”

SCE&G has committed to remove all its coal ash from unlined waterfront storage to dry, lined

storage away from waterways. In South Carolina, all the utilities are moving all their coal ash from unlined waterfront pits to dry storage away from rivers and lakes and separated from the groundwater by synthetic liners.

“North Carolina’s groundwater deserves the same protection as South Carolina’s groundwater,” said Sam Perkins, the Catawba Riverkeeper. “The Catawba-Wateree River in South Carolina is being protected from arsenic in groundwater through the removal of coal ash from unlined riverfront pits. Yet, in North Carolina, Duke Energy and DEQ are proposing to leave coal ash submerged in groundwater in unlined pits on the banks of the Catawba River. If we want to keep our rivers clean and protect our drinking water, we have to get the coal ash out of our groundwater and unlined pits.”

In its December 31, 2015 risk ratings for the Duke Energy’s Marshall and Allen facilities on Lakes Norman and Wylie, North Carolina’s DEQ did not require that coal ash be removed from groundwater beside the Catawba River. Instead, DEQ rated those sites so that the coal ash may be left in the groundwater in unlined pits next to those Catawba River lakes. In response to litigation brought by the Southern Environmental Law Center and the Catawba Riverkeeper, Duke Energy has previously agreed to remove the coal ash from its Riverbend facility on the banks of Mountain Island Lake on the Catawba River. In May of 2015, Duke Energy companies pleaded guilty to coal ash crimes on the Catawba River and remain on criminal probation.

Citizens will have the opportunity to urge N.C. DEQ and Duke Energy to remove coal ash from unlined pits in North Carolina through public comments and public hearings. The public can send DEQ comments until April 18. Public hearings will be held around the state in March.

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The Southern Environmental Law Center is a regional nonprofit using the power of the law to protect the health and environment of the Southeast (Virginia, Tennessee, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama). Founded in 1986, SELC's team of more than 60 legal and policy experts represent more than 100 partner groups on issues of climate change and energy, air and water quality, forests, the coast and wetlands, transportation, and land use.

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