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Groups tell PacifiCorp to fix extensive contamination at Utah coal plant

Decades of illegal coal ash waste disposal have tainted ground and surface water with "extremely high levels of pollutants," monitoring data show

SALT LAKE CITY – Decades of negligent management of millions of tons of coal ash waste at Rocky Mountain Power's Huntington power plant have resulted in widespread water contamination problems, according to a notice filed by the Sierra Club and HEAL Utah that demands the owners fix the problems.

The notice of intent, sent to Rocky Mountain Power's parent company, Portland-based PacifiCorp, details the utility's numerous problems in dealing with the ash waste and scrubber residues from when coal is burned. Those include "elaborate engineering" schemes such as backfilling natural tributaries and creating a "research farm" where wastewater and leachate from coal ash landfills are used for "irrigation." The notice also cites related problems that are contaminating ground and surface water, including an unpermitted pipe that is discharging directly into Huntington Creek and failure to mitigate runoff from a massive pile of coal stored near the plant.

The net result of these problems is contaminated water flowing into and fouling Huntington Creek and its tributaries, and the groups contend that U.S. clean water standards require the company to fix the problems.

"Clean water is precious. We all count on it for irrigation, for recreation, for drinking and public health," said Lindsay Beebe, an organizer for the Sierra Club's Beyond Coal campaign in Utah. "So when a coal plant owner like PacifiCorp circumvents even the most basic safeguards to protect against water contamination from coal waste – and has been doing so for decades – that sounds a serious alarm."

"Coal-ash waste has pollutants like lead and mercury in it. There's a big risk of contamination even when it's managed properly from the start with things like lined impoundments. When it's not, as we see at the Huntington plant, there are absolutely going to be problems, especially for local water."

Running at full capacity, the Huntington plant generates an estimated 450,000 tons of coal ash waste each year – enough to fill a train stretching from Salt Lake to Provo – which is dumped into unlined landfills, one used since at least 1973 and a newer one built in 2000. Wastewater consisting of leachate from the landfills and from power plant operations also has been stored in two unlined waste ponds at Huntington.

PacifiCorp and Rocky Mountain Power have a record of taking highly questionable steps over the years to try to deal with the waste and the contamination it has caused. At one point, records show, the company back-filled two small natural tributaries below the landfills that had become contaminated in order to keep them from flowing directly into Huntington Creek. Water from the streams was diverted into pipes that drain into an ash-waste facility at the plant – even though it doesn't appear the company ever had any permits to dig in or divert the streams.

The company also concocted a unique scheme to sidestep proper safeguards for disposing of contaminated wastewater by designating land downstream from the plant a “research farm.” Leachate and other sources of wastewater are used to irrigate alfalfa and other crops, and a drainage system under the farm collects shallow groundwater and drains into Huntington Creek. At a similar “research farm” operated by Rocky Mountain Power at its Hunter coal plant, a study determined that cattle grazing in the fields irrigated with coal plant wastewater developed soft teeth and bone weaknesses (although the researchers somehow concluded that the meat was still safe for consumption).

“This farm is a cover-up for dumping pollution without any protections in place – a lot of pollution for a long time,” said HEAL Utah executive director Matt Pacenza. “If we didn’t have records documenting all these schemes, it would be hard to believe they were true.”

EPA data show millions of pounds of toxic chemicals disposed of in Huntington’s ash waste landfills, including barium, chromium, manganese, mercury and vanadium. Monitoring data, which come directly from reports to the Utah Dept. of Water Quality, show concentrations of indicator pollutants steadily intensifying and spreading in ground and surface water as it moves downhill from the landfills toward the research farm.

A 2003 report shows that contamination levels grew progressively worse starting around 1996 as a plume of toxic chemicals identified with coal ash spread into a spring near the ash landfills. Levels of boron – a common indicator of coal ash contamination – increased by a factor of 50 and nitrates by a factor 12, dissolved solids jumped more than 500 percent and chloride levels spiked 600 percent.

A 2007 report prepared by a consultant for PacifiCorp tracked contamination seeping from the newer landfill to large volumes of sulfur-laden slurry from the plant’s pollution scrubbers that had been disposed of there. And monitoring data from 2003 to 2014 show that pollution from the coal ash waste in the landfills has spread widely across the site and reached the groundwater adjacent to Huntington Creek in places.

In addition to its coal ash handling practices, the groups also have discovered further evidence of negligence. A massive pile of coal is being stored across the highway from the Huntington power plant, without even the most basic storm water protections in place to keep tainted water from running off of it.

“Go stand next to that coal pile right now and you won’t find a single sand bag, drain or any other safeguard shielding Huntington Creek and its tributaries from the runoff that comes from hundreds of thousands of tons of coal,” said Pacenza.

Last year, PacifiCorp withdrew its application to renew a permit allowing it to discharge pollution into Huntington Creek, suggesting that the plant was no longer doing so. But a site visit this year showed a pipe from the plant clearly spewing a steady stream into the ravine that leads to the creek. (See photo)



HEAL Utah and the Sierra Club worked with Public Justice to draft the notice because of the latter’s experience working on coal ash issues. They are giving PacifiCorp, which is owned by Warren Buffett’s Berkshire Hathaway Energy, up to three months to correct the problems. Under the Clean Water Act, the company faces fines up to \$37,500 per day per violation.

“Cleaning up the severe pollution at the Huntington plant would be a game changer for the industry, and the community,” said Richard Webster, an attorney with Public Justice who has been involved with numerous legal actions related to coal ash waste and contamination “Had the coal-ash waste at Huntington been managed responsibly from the outset, it might be a different story. Instead, Rocky Mountain Power and PacifiCorp botched their coal ash management and have been trying to avoid cleaning up the mess they created for years.”

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Copies of the notice of intent are available upon request from the media contacts above.