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DRN files Petition with USEPA Concerning Coal Fly Ash Basin Failures

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Tomorrow it will be 3 weeks since PPL's coal fly ash storage basin blow out began at the Martins Creek power plant in Northampton County, PA (August 23). It started with a small leak, then a flood over the roads and fields adjacent to the basin, then an eruption of coal fly ash slurry. Over the following days, at least 100 million gallons of coal fly ash effluent gushed into the Oughoughton Creek and the Delaware River (company estimate). The basin, 16 years old, holds coal fly ash produced by PPL's two coal fired units and may be used for disposal of other industrial waste on the site. Normally the water-filled waste impoundment settles out fly ash sediment before the effluent is piped to the river, alongside the Oughoughton Creek, in the vicinity of Foul Rift. The company reported that a gate in the basin broke apart, causing the uncontrolled discharge of effluent and sludge.

Known components of the fly ash include: arsenic, mercury, lead, silica, crystalline silica, barium, chromium, beryllium, thallium, antimony, selenium and possibly sulfur, cadmium, and other heavy metals. High readings of many toxic components were found in the river water after the blowout. For instance, PADEP water tests showed arsenic spiked on August 26 from less than 4 ppb upstream to 592 ppb at the outfall (safe drinking water standard is 10 ppb effective January 2006 nationally, 5 ppb effective January 2006 in NJ and presently 50 ppb). Other significant spikes were: mercury (1.32 ug/l), barium (503 ug/l), selenium (37.7 ug/l), lead (22.2 ug/l), and other heavy metals.

Today, although the color of the water in the river has cleared, a slurry of ash covers the bottom of the river bank to bank at and below the PPL plant. Grayish sludge is evident on the river bottom for many miles, recently reported in the deep pools between the rocks as far as Bulls Island, about 40 miles downstream. Residents are complaining bitterly that nothing is being done to clean up the gunk that sits smothering the life out of the bottom of the river except at the plant's outfall area. PPL and PADEP have been focusing clean up efforts on the land adjacent to the basin, the creek, and area in the river at the outfall and even those efforts have been rife with problems; The pumping of the coal ash sludge from the river bottom to an emergency back up basin was halted this past Thursday, September 9, when that basin, built in the 1950's, sprung a leak. Delaware

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Riverkeeper Network (DRN) and the public had advocated for not using the back up basin, which has no lining and is not built to present day standards. DRN had also called for the shut down of the coal-fired units to eliminate the need for storage of newly produced coal ash that had no safe place to go. That same day (September 9) in an attempt to head off another basin blowout disaster, PPL stopped pumping clean up waste to the back up basin and shut down the coal-fired units.

PADEP has taken samples from the existing groundwater monitoring wells around the back up basin and those test results are expected within a week or so. DRN has urged PADEP not to allow PPL to resume placing any material in the back up basin until those water quality tests results are known. The concern is that pollutants in the basin have been and will continue to be pushed into the groundwater from the unlined basin. DRN has advocated for the clean up of the River to continue without interruption, however, with clean up material stored in containers or taken off site.

Dried coal fly ash is still stuck to the sides of the riverbanks on both sides of the river at least as far downstream as Easton, almost 10 river miles. Air pollution from the windborne coal fly ash is a great concern for those downwind; as it dries, tiny particles are released to the air. Coal fly ash is a known pulmonary health hazard and crystalline silica, which is in this fly ash, causes silicosis and is classified as a probable human carcinogen. Residents at public meetings this week were desperately seeking help to remove the ash; PPL has announced that it will be cleaning it up but with no appreciable rain since the blowout, the ash has been steadily turning to polluted dust.

The predicted problems with the back up basin and the lack of action over the past weeks to clean up the ash waste on the riverbanks and in the river has led DRN to file a Petition with the United States Environmental Protection Agency. A formal request was submitted on Friday, September 9, to the EPA under 42 U.S.C. 9605(b) for a Preliminary Assessment.

“The fact that the contaminated sludge is migrating downstream because it has not been removed from the river, that it is entering the air as a hazardous pollutant, that the clean up efforts have led to further problems and possible additional pollution to the river and/or groundwater from the loading up of waste into the substandard back up basin, and the fact that PPL is now considering using the basin that failed on August 23 to hold waste on an emergency basis, are evidence that EPA needs to step in, assess and oversee all that is happening at the PPL plant and with the cleanup”, said Maya van Rossum, the Delaware Riverkeeper.

“This action was taken by DRN despite the assembling of a Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) team, of which DRN is very supportive and advocated for, because the team does not seem to be influencing ongoing activities at the power plant”, said Tracy Carluccio, Director of Special Projects for DRN. “DRN has offered to work with and supply information to the NRDA team but considers EPA oversight to be sorely and urgently needed at the Plant.”