

# Laid to Waste

## The Dirty Secret of Combustion Waste from America's Power Plants

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Every year, America's coal and oil-fired power plants produce over 100 million tons of solid and liquid wastes. Seventy-six million tons are primarily disposed of at more than 600 coal-waste and 177 oil-waste management units located in 43 States throughout the U.S. These wastes are typically disposed of in either landfills or surface impoundments that are usually located at the same site as the power plant. Current disposal management practices do not prevent releases of these wastes to the environment.

*Incredibly, disposal of these toxic solid and liquid wastes are subject to no federal safeguards whatsoever, having been exempted from EPA rule by Congress for the past 20 years!* These disposal sites are operating under State rules that frequently are far less protective than rules for household trash.

### Remove the Exemption – Regulate These Wastes

EPA has the authority to end the political exemption from regulation that today applies to coal and oil combustion wastes. After 17 years of delay and lawsuits, EPA is finally under federal court order to decide by March 10, 2000 whether these wastes should be regulated under the federal solid waste law, Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA).

We are calling on EPA to designate these wastes as "hazardous" under RCRA. Coal and oil power plant combustion wastes require federal regulatory oversight because of the toxicity of their components, the demonstrated and documented danger they pose to public health and the environment. *It's time for EPA to recognize power plant combustion waste disposal facilities for what they are: huge, unregulated toxic dumps. It's time for power plants to face the full cost of operating under all environmental performance standards, including solid waste disposal standards.*

### Power Plant Combustion Wastes Endanger Our Health and the Environment

These wastes contain concentrated levels of contaminants like arsenic, mercury, chromium and cadmium that can damage the nervous systems and other organs, especially in children. Analyses performed for EPA show that some of these pollutants would eventually migrate from disposal sites and contaminate nearby groundwater. As an example, the excess **cancer risks** for children drinking groundwater contaminated with arsenic from power plant wastes have been estimated to be as high as **one-in-one hundred** — ten thousand times higher than the Agency's own regulatory goal of reducing cancer risks to less than one-in-one million.

Low-income communities and people of color shoulder a disproportionate share of the health risks from these wastes. People living within one mile of power plant waste

facilities are twice as likely to be poor and about thirty percent more likely to be non-white, than the national average. Similar high poverty rates are found in 118 of the 120 coal-producing counties, where power plant wastes increasingly are being disposed of in unlined, under-regulated mines, often directly into groundwater.

We can point our finger to more than 60 places in the country where these wastes have degraded our public ground and surface waters beyond any use — consumptive, agricultural, industrial, or environmental. Fish consumption advisories in Texas and North Carolina have been directly linked to coal combustion waste disposal. Studies in South Carolina have documented multiple developmental, physiological and behavioral abnormalities in the nearly 25 species of amphibians and reptiles inhabiting wetlands associated with a coal ash disposal site.

### **State Oversight of Current Management Practices is Insufficient**

Most power plant combustion wastes are disposed of in older surface impoundments that almost never have liners to prevent liquids from leaching out, underground systems to collect the leachate, or groundwater monitors. An industry survey revealed that about 40 percent of the coal waste landfills and 80 percent of the coal waste surface impoundments do not have liners, and less than half the landfills and only one percent of impoundments have leachate collection systems. In addition, there are also direct discharges to surface waters either by permitted discharges or overflow drainage from impoundments. State permits rarely, if ever, limit the discharge of contaminants known to be in coal and oil combustion waste.

In many States where coal is mined, tremendous amounts of coal combustion wastes are being dumped into active unlined coal mines, and in some cases directly into groundwater. Typically, groundwater monitoring systems at the mine are completely inadequate for handling such a mass disposal program and no cleanup standards are enforced.

Current State rules are uneven and in some cases, non-existent. In some States, liquids from impoundments are not only allowed to percolate to the groundwater, the disposal units are actually designed to allow this. Only a handful of States have adequately protective programs, and these protections do nothing to help the citizens of other States. A federal regulatory umbrella can level the playing field by requiring common environmental safeguards.