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PPL Ash Pit Blows Out into Delaware River; Pollution Event Continues During Clean Up

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As a result of a disastrous failure of a storage basin at PPL's Martins Creek power plant in Northampton County, PA fly ash-laden effluent spewed into the Delaware River above Easton/Phillipsburg from Wednesday, August 24 through Saturday August 27. The company estimates approximately 60 million gallons of effluent was released into the river. The basin, at least 15 years old, holds fly ash produced by PPL's two coal fired units; what other industrial waste is deposited into the basin is unknown. Normally the water-filled basin settles out fly ash sediment before the effluent is piped to the Oughoughton Creek (a protected cold water fishery), which flows to the Delaware River in the vicinity of Foul Rift. The effluent bypassed the usual settling process and gushed untreated into the river.

A slick of grayish slime has been evident on the river since Thursday and has moved as far south as Milford, NJ today. The river, which had been crystal clear before the blowout due to lack of rain and low flows, is an opaque brownish-gray. A white-gray muck coats the edges of the riverbanks and is pooled in eddies along the river in Lower Mount Bethel Township, PA and Harmony Township, NJ. Booms were placed around the outfall pipe on Thursday but it was too late to stop the ooze of the sludgy discharge. The water was sampled by PA DEP and showed elevated (16ppb) of arsenic; the EPA has adopted a safe drinking water standard of 10 ppb, effective in January, 2006 and New Jersey will adopt a 5 ppb standard effective statewide in January 2006. The current standard is 50 ppb. Whether any other components were tested for is unknown. The City of Easton, downstream of the plant, shut down its intakes and is using stored water supply. Toxics in coal fly ash include silica, crystalline silica, alumina, heavy metals, sulfur, arsenic, and more.

On Wednesday night when the failure began, manhole covers blew out from the discharge pipe flooding local roads and farm fields adjacent to the plant with fly ash effluent. The fly ash and soil beneath it, which is drying on the ground, is being dug up by the company today with excavating equipment and dumped on plant property. As the ash dries, it becomes wind-born, adding significant air pollution to this pollution event. The fly ash must be kept wet to keep it from being dispersed. Coal fly ash is a known pulmonary health hazard and crystalline silica, which is in this fly ash, is classified as a probable human carcinogen. Removal of the drying fly ash, several feet thick in places, is both a race against time and a sensitive operation as the disturbed ash is carried downwind.

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“The natural resource damages from this environmental catastrophe will be far-reaching as the sediment in the effluent settles on the river bottom, smothering aquatic life, and as toxics leach into the river water and groundwater”, said Maya van Rossum, the Delaware Riverkeeper and leader of Delaware Riverkeeper Network. The organization is deeply concerned about the long-term impacts of the pollution event.

“The plant should shut down its coal fired units immediately”, said Tracy Carluccio, Director of Special Projects for Delaware Riverkeeper Network. “It is irresponsible for PPL to continue to produce fly ash during clean up and while its approved basin is not operational. Coal fly ash must be deposited in a specially constructed lined wet basin and it does not seem that PPL has an acceptable basin of sufficient size to safely hold the ash being cleaned up and the ash being produced by the operating coal burning units,” said Carluccio.

DRN criticized the company for not warning downstream tubers, boaters, and fishers on the river, who are being exposed to the sheen at least as far downstream as Milford/Upper Black Eddy. “People should have been warned and should still be warned to not get this toxic mix on their skin. OSHA warns that fly ash should not be inhaled and skin and eye contact should be avoided”, said Carluccio. “Our investigations revealed that on Friday PADEP told at least one canoe rental company downstream that there was no danger. As far as the toxic components leaching from the ash slurry in the water, until a complete assessment is done, it should not be assumed that the river water is safe,” said Carluccio.

The Delaware Riverkeeper is the voice of the Delaware River and its streams, championing their rights as living members of our community, and is leader for the Delaware Riverkeeper Network. The Delaware Riverkeeper and the Delaware Riverkeeper Network (DRN) stand as vigilant protectors and defenders of the River, its tributaries and its watershed committed to restoring the natural balance where it has been lost and ensuring its preservation where it still exists. DRN is a nonprofit membership-supported environmental organization with over 6,500 members in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York and Delaware.

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