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PPL Power Plant Ash Pit Blows Out Into Delaware River

Contact: Tracy Carluccio
Office: 215-369-1188
Cell: 215-692-2329

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 has spewed into the Delaware River above Easton/Phillipsburg since Wednesday evening, August 24. The discharge continues into Friday, August 26 because plant operators have been unsuccessful in repairing the break. The basin, at least 15 years old, holds fly ash produced by PPL's two coal fired units. 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 at a rate of about 28 million gallons per day. The flow seems less today but is continuing. The electricity plant continues to operate.

A slick of grayish slime is evident on the river as far south as Raubsville, PA. 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 yesterday afternoon 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. Whether any other components were tested for is unknown. The City of Easton, downstream of the plant, has shut down its intakes and is using stored water supply. Toxics in 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. The fly ash effluent is now drying on the fields, several inches to several feet thick. As the ash dries, it will become wind-born, adding significant air pollution to this pollution event.

"The Natural Resource damages from this environmental catastrophe will be far-reaching as the sediment in the effluent settles on the river bottom and as toxics enter the river water, migrate to groundwater and enter the food chain", said Maya van Rossum, the Delaware Riverkeeper and leader of Delaware Riverkeeper Network. The organization plans to pursue restitution from PPL for the long-term impacts of the pollution event.

Delaware Riverkeeper Network
300 Pond Street, Second Floor
Bristol, PA 19007
tel: (215) 369-1188
fax: (215) 369-1181
drkn@delawareriverkeeper.org
www.delawareriverkeeper.org

“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 when its approved basin is not operational.” In regards to why the ash must be handled carefully Carluccio said, “The industry admits that fly ash must be kept wet in order to control particulates from entering the air, where they can be breathed in and cause serious health problems. The ash causes pulmonary disease and crystalline silica, which is in this fly ash, is classified as a possible human carcinogen.”

Carluccio also said “The fly ash that deposited on Wednesday in the fields, on the roads and on the river banks must be cleaned up immediately in order to protect the residents from these toxic air pollutants. This must be done NOW, before the wind picks it up. Downwind residents should be told to stay inside until this is done”. DRN also called for warnings to be issued to downstream water intakes and tubers, boaters, and fishers on the river. “It is far too dangerous to allow people to 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.

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.

For more information contact tracy@delawareriverkeeper.org