

Can a coal ash spill happen here?



Greg Hager, vice president and general manager of the Neil Simpson complex at Wyodak, holds a pile of coal ash in his hands at Wyodak. The ash is what is left after coal is burnt and can be used as an addition to a variety of substances like concrete or asphalt. - *News-Record photo by Sarah Voegele*

By ALEXANDRA SUKHOMLINOVA, News-Record Writer asukhomlinova@gillette newsrecord.net

Published: Thursday, February 19, 2009 1:25 PM MST

Local industry officials are confident that a coal ash spill similar to one in Tennessee in December won't happen in Wyoming.

They say that the Tennessee accident probably happened because of bad engineering, not because of lack of federal rules.

Until lately, coal ash hasn't been a hot environmental topic. But the issue got national attention after 5.4 million cubic yards of coal ash escaped a pond by a power plant in Tennessee. The event drew national attention to the material produced by coal-fired power plants, and raised questions about the safety of coal ash ponds.

"I know that on the federal level there's still some debate that coal combustion waste should be considered as hazardous waste," said Bob Doctor, program manager for the solid waste permitting at the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality. "There's a lot going on right now along these areas."

Coal ash ponds similar to the one in Tennessee are scattered across the country. There are 162 power plants that store coal ash in ponds. Some of them store as little as 500 tons of coal ash and as much as 653,300 tons, according to an Associated Press report.

One of those coal ash ponds is in Campbell County and is run by PacifiCorp, which owns 80 percent of the Wyodak plant. The pond stores about 28,000 tons of coal ash from Wyodak.

Executives from Black Hills Corp., which owns 20 percent of Wyodak, say that the pond is safe. Because the pond is located in the mine pit, the only way that ash can escape it is only if it runs uphill, said Greg Hager, vice president and general manager for the Neil Simpson complex at Wyodak.

When it is taken out of the pond, the ash goes to the mine pit during reclamation. Black Hills' environmental engineers say they regularly monitor the underground water in the area for metal content. DEQ officials confirmed that the pond goes through a host of regulations.

But just as with carbon dioxide, the dispute about coal ash is complex. Each state has its own regulations for the material because there is no federal policy on how power plants should dispose of ash. Some states are more cautious about it than others, because coal ash has never been defined as a hazardous material.

While some states allow using it in road bases and cement bases, Wyoming is more careful, said Tim Mordhorst, environmental system manager for Black Hills.

Plus, the DEQ requires chemical analysis of that ash before it is allowed to be used in a road base or cement. Such requests are reviewed on an individual basis, Doctor said.

The last time the agency received that type of request was six months ago from a power plant in southeast Wyoming, and the request was turned down, he said.

The debate about coal ash is likely to get more complex before it gets resolved. Not only has the Environmental Protection agency promised to study the issue, but it also needs to decide which is the proper agency to regulate it — the EPA or federal Office of Surface Mining, Doctor said.

The Tennessee incident — which was labeled a catastrophe last week by the owners of the plant — “got everybody’s attention and provided more support for those who would like to minimize those activities,” Doctor said. “Others may say we had plenty of regulations. What we didn’t have was good design.”

But local environmental groups think that stricter federal regulations are needed.

“We need to understand that there is no such thing as clean coal,” said Brad Mohrmann, Sierra Club associate regional representative. “Even if we do eventually remove CO2, there are still other risks that come along with coal. These risks need to be addressed as well.”

Coal ash ponds in Wyoming

- Platte County, Basin Electric Power Co-op: **79,100** tons
- Lincoln County, PacifiCorp: **119,000** tons
- Campbell County, PacifiCorp: **28,000** tons