

State, PPL reach deal on waste ponds

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press | Posted: Thursday, February 25, 2010 12:00 am |

BILLINGS — PPL Montana said Wednesday it has agreed with state regulators to more closely monitor wastewater seeping from its huge coal-fired Colstrip Power Plant in a deal that could prompt new cleanups following decades of contamination of surrounding water tables.

In 2008, PPL and four companies that co-own the eastern Montana plant paid \$25 million to Colstrip residents whose water supplies were fouled by leaking ash ponds.

The contamination dates to the 1980s at Colstrip, the second largest coal-fired plant west of the Mississippi.

The plant's prior operator, Montana Power, kept the problems hidden for years before notifying the community. By then, water tainted with boron had caused stomach ailments, although no serious illnesses were reported.

To prevent a repeat of those events, PPL and the Department of Environmental Quality are proposing new guidelines for the company to investigate and clean up seeping wastewater. The proposal remains open for public comment through March 12.

PPL spokesman David Hoffman said Wednesday that the agreement builds on cleanup work done by the company since it took over the 2,100 megawatt plant in 1999.

"There's always going to be some amount of seepage," Hoffman said. "This helps clarify what our obligations are so we're all on the same page. You're going to see a better organized process with public input being an important piece of it."

A second lawsuit, filed in 2007, is still pending against the plant. Three ranching families allege wastewater from storage ponds outside Colstrip contaminated their rural property.

Those ponds are included in the proposed agreement with the state, although PPL has denied the alleged contamination.

Clint McRae, a Colstrip-area rancher whose cousin is among the plaintiffs in the lawsuit, said PPL's response in that case continues three decades of stonewalling by the coal plant's operators.

McRae blasted the proposed deal with PPL, saying state regulators would allow the wastewater seepage to continue even as the surrounding community remained at risk.

"You can either fix the symptom or you can fix the problem, and they're fixing the symptom," McRae said.

The agreement contains no schedule for PPL to finish its investigation into whether additional cleanup is needed.

In 1976, the Montana Board of Natural Resources and Conservation approved an expansion of Colstrip on the condition that the waste water ponds be sealed. The board said at the time that the plant would not threaten ground and surface water supplies.

PPL's Hoffman said the material used to line the ponds have been upgraded several times since they were built. And over the last three years, PPL installed two plants that dry out coal ash waste from the power generator, reducing the amount of water involved and cutting down on potential seepage from the storage ponds.

Removing the contamination that has already occurred would be near-impossible, said Duane Ankney, a Republican legislator from Colstrip.

"Once that was leaked into the water table, it's there and it would take forever to get out," said Ankney, a plaintiff in the case that ended with a \$25 million settlement.

"But it looks like they are sincere in trying to take care of the problem. PPL is making an honest attempt going forward."