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Coal-Burning Power Plants are the Nation's Biggest Toxic Water Polluters

Every day, coal-burning power plants dump millions of gallons of wastewater loaded with toxic pollutants like arsenic, lead, mercury, boron, cadmium, chromium, and selenium into rivers, lakes, streams and bays. This pollution is discharged directly into surface water from power plants and impoundments that many plants use to dispose of coal ash and smokestack scrubber sludge. Toxic chemicals also seep from unlined impoundments and landfills into ground and surface waters. EPA estimates that coal-burning power plants release **at least 5.5 billion pounds of pollution into the nation's waterways every year**.[1] These plants are responsible for at least 50 to 60 percent of the toxic water pollutants discharged into U.S. waters – more than the other nine top polluting industries combined.[1]

Despite the scope of this pollution problem, power plant water pollution standards have not been updated since 1982, and existing standards do not require power plants to limit discharges of dangerous heavy metals, nutrients, or many other harmful pollutants. In fact, a 2013 report from Environmental Integrity Project, Sierra Club, Earthjustice, Clean Water Action and Waterkeeper Alliance found that **nearly 70 percent of power plant water pollution permits (188 out of 274) have no limits on how much arsenic, boron, cadmium, lead, mercury, and selenium that these plants can discharge.[1]**

Environmental and Health Effects of Power Plant Water Pollution

Heavy metals and other toxic pollutants commonly found in coal plant wastewater can be extremely harmful to humans and aquatic life, even in small doses. Exposure to toxics like mercury, lead and arsenic can cause birth defects, cancer and other health problems. These pollutants do not degrade over time and many bio-accumulate, increasing in concentration as they travel up the food chain, resulting in long-term damage to aquatic ecosystems.

According to EPA, power plant water pollution has caused:

- Over 160 water bodies to not meet state water quality standards;
- Government agencies to issue fish consumption advisories for 185 waters;
- Degradation of 399 water bodies across the country that serve as public drinking water supplies.[1] *Nearly 40% of all plants discharge pollution within five miles of a drinking water intake.[1]*

EPA's Proposed Power Plant Water Pollution Standards

In April 2013, EPA proposed new power plant water pollution standards to begin to fix this problem. The agency is under court order to finalize these standards in September 2015. Once finalized, these new standards will, for the first time, set technology-based limits on the amount of toxic pollutants power plants can dump in rivers, lakes, streams and bays. EPA's proposal contains multiple options that vary significantly in the amount of pollution they would control, but they all would require the use of existing technology that is affordable. The strongest of these options – Option 5 – would eliminate almost all toxic discharges and Option 4, the next strongest option, would eliminate new coal ash discharges and require rigorous treatment for smokestack scrubber sludge.

The most stringent options proposed, if finalized, would benefit our nation's health, environment and economy. These options would:

- Eliminate between 3.3 and 5.3 billion pounds of pollution per year.[1]
- Reduce the number of receiving waters that exceed water quality, wildlife, or human health criteria by 66 to 93 percent.[1]
- Create millions of dollars in benefits every year in the form of improved health and recreational opportunities for all Americans, in addition to the incalculable benefits of clean and healthy watersheds.[1]
- Cost less than one percent of annual revenue for most coal plants and at most about two pennies a day in expenses for ordinary Americans, if the utilities passed some of the treatment costs on to consumers.[1]

Unfortunately EPA's proposal also includes incredibly weak options inserted by political operatives, rather than EPA scientists, which would do next to nothing to curb this dangerous pollution. Weak options are a giveaway to polluters, and Americans deserve better. Without strong limits, the problem of toxic wastewater pollution from coal plants is only going to get worse – EPA has estimated that this waste is going to increase by 28% over the next 15 years. **It is time for the Administration to set strong, national standards to end decades of toxic water pollution from power plants and to protect public health and our water.**

[1] EPA, Environmental Assessment for the Proposed Effluent Limitation Guidelines and Standards for the Steam Electric Power Generating Point Source Category 3-14 (April 2013).
[1] *Id.* at 3-13.
[1] Environmental Integrity Project et al., *Closing the Floodgates: How the Coal Industry is Poisoning Our Water and How We Can Stop It* (July 2013) available at: http://www.cleanwateraction.org/files/publications/closing-floodgates.pdf
[1] http://water.epa.gov/scitech/wastetech/guide/steam-electric/proposed.cfm
[1] EPA, Environmental Assessment for the Proposed Effluent Limitation Guidelines and Standards for the Steam Electric Power Generating Point Source Category 3-33 (April 2013).
[1] 78 Fed. Reg. at 34,485, Table IX-4.
[1] EPA, Environmental Assessment for the Proposed Effluent Limitation Guidelines and Standards for the Steam Electric Power Generating Point Source Category 6-14, Table 6-5 (April 2013).
[1] EPA, Benefit and Cost Analysis for the Proposed Effluent Limitations Guidelines and Standards for the Steam Electric Power Generating Point Source Category at 12-2 (April 2013).
[1] 78 Fed. Reg. at 34,432, 34,501, Table XI-9.