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New Report: Alabama Coal Ash Ponds Receive Most Toxic Metals in the Nation in 2010

According to the Environmental Integrity Project (EIP), Alabama power plants lead the way in disposal of wastes containing toxic metals into coal ash ponds. Ten states accounted for three quarters of total pond disposal in 2010, including (in rank order): Alabama, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, Ohio, Indiana, North Dakota, Minnesota, and Michigan. Just 20 facilities account for more than half of the toxic metals (57 million pounds) contained in power plant waste and disposed of in surface impoundments in 2010. Four of these are in Alabama, with Alabama Power's Miller Steam Plant (Jefferson County) ranked first in the nation in this category. Alabama Power's Gaston, Gorgas and Barry Steam Plants round out the top twenty.

These figures are based upon information compiled in a national database called the Toxics Release Inventory. Power companies are required to report by volume the toxic chemicals that are contained in coal ash and other coal combustion wastes dumped into surface impoundments, or ponds, every year. In 2010, power plants reported disposal of wastes containing 112.8 million pounds of toxic metals or metal compounds, a category that includes arsenic, chromium, lead, and other pollutants that are hazardous in small concentrations and difficult to remove from the environment once released. According to EIP, that reflects a nine percent increase in toxics disposals since 2009, and is higher than the total reported in 2008.

Most of these surface impoundments are unlined, which means the toxins in the ash are likely to seep into groundwater or nearby creeks and rivers. Monitoring data developed in other areas of the country shows this is happening at many coal ash surface impoundments.

Alabama Power's Miller Steam Plant (Jefferson County) and Gorgas Steam Plant (Walker County) are both in the Black Warrior River watershed, just northwest of Birmingham. Miller ranked first in the nation for disposing toxic metal wastes into coal ash ponds and Gorgas ranked fifteenth. Riverkeeper Nelson Brooke has concerns: "These coal ash ponds discharge wastewater directly to surface waters in large volumes on a daily basis. Miller discharges to the Locust Fork and Gorgas discharges to the Mulberry Fork, two tributaries of the Black Warrior that are heavily used for recreation and fishing. A major concern moving forward is the increase in the amount of toxics being discharged by the coal-fired power plants to these coal ash ponds and ultimately to surface waters due to the addition of scrubbers, which pull some pollutants out of their air emissions and transfer them to our water resources instead."

Wastewater permits for these plants are up for review every five years, and the next cycle of re-permitting begins soon. Black Warrior Riverkeeper is encouraging residents in the greater Birmingham region and throughout Alabama to insist that ADEM to make Alabama Power's permits more protective of our rivers, lakes, and public health.

Environmental Integrity Project's coal ash waste disposal analysis can be seen by clicking [here](#).

For pictures of Miller Steam Plant and Gorgas Steam Plant and their ash ponds, click [here](#).

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Black Warrior Riverkeeper (blackwarriorriver.org) is a citizen-based nonprofit environmental advocacy organization whose mission is to protect and restore the Black Warrior River and its tributaries. A member of Waterkeeper Alliance, Black Warrior Riverkeeper was the Alabama Environmental Council's 2007 Conservation Organization of the Year and the American Canoe Association's 2008 Green Paddle Award winner. Nelson Brooke, Riverkeeper, won the Alabama Rivers Alliance's 2010 River Hero Award. In 2011 the Black Warrior became one of America's [Most Endangered Rivers](#).