

An Open Letter to the University of Alabama System Board

Donald B. Stewart, M.D.
UASOM '85

Aug 15, 2014

The December 2008 release of toxic sludge from the TVA's Kingston power plant and the similar Duke Energy coal ash spill that polluted the Dan River last February, were unexpected events that damaged miles of riverfront property and contaminated drinking water, costing billions of dollars in losses and cleanup, and millions more in fines and other costs.

The sequence of mistakes and risk mismanagement that led to the BP oil spill that resulted in billions of dollars in physical, environmental, economic and punitive damages were also unknown to the public prior to the Deepwater Horizon blowout. Similarly, January's Freedom Industries chemical spill into the Elk River that poisoned the drinking water of 300,000 West Virginians was a management oversight, a maintenance error that occurred without the awareness, prior concern, or preparation of informed and responsive citizens.

Each of these horrific events received international attention, and the companies responsible weathered the justified indignation of both the people affected by the massive toxic spills, and the collective ire of a nation stunned to learn, repeatedly, of negligence on such a dramatic scale. Further, each of the companies involved – BP, Duke Energy, TVA, and Freedom Industries suffered long-term public relations blowback, lasting market repercussions, governmental regulation, fines and legal penalties that continue to this day.

Imagine, then, how much greater the consequences for the UA System, and the entire Alabama coal industry if the Shepherd Bend mine is allowed to proceed, and *when* – not *if* – the sediment, heavy metals and other pollutants discharged from the mine flood the Mulberry Fork of the Black Warrior River, fouling the source of drinking water of our state's largest metropolis.

Imagine what will happen when an organized, educated and above all *prepared* group of concerned citizens including the hundreds of businesses and organizations in the Shepherd Bend Mine Opposition Coalition, trumpet the news that this disaster never even had to happen. That we had in fact worked diligently for years to convince you to keep it from occurring?

Forget about the environmental damage that is within your power to prevent. Ignore the economic and health impact on the people who will suddenly be without fresh water from the Mulberry Fork. Disregard the people at the front end of the spill, who could be the first to ingest compromised drinking water before the disaster is brought under control. Ignore how this action runs counter to the mission of the healthcare function that defines so much of University activity.

Close your eyes to the fact that some of Birmingham's poorest residents will be those most affected, as they line up to buy bottled water they may not be able to afford.

Forget all of that. Instead, imagine the public relations nightmare that will ensue. Think about the businesses that will be damaged, the jobs lost, the subsequent reductions in sales and income tax revenue, the number of people that will suddenly have to rely on state support - not just for water, but for their economic survival. Think about the new industries that will choose *not* to locate in our state because we don't even care about a commodity as basic as drinking water. Think about the students who will go elsewhere to spend their parents' tuition money, and the alumni who will think twice before writing their annual donation check, or supporting the next UA endowment.

Think of the black eye the University of Alabama will have to suffer in the aftermath of a Shepherd Bend spill. (I can already imagine the popularity of houndstooth hats with charcoal smudges on them, or custom-labeled bottles of brown 'UA Tea', can't you?) Think about how much money it will take to counter the negative publicity - not to mention the long-term losses from businesses that choose not to associate with the UA brand. How long it will take for that black eye to heal? Is it really worth the risk?

Then think about how it is all, every bit of it, **100% avoidable**.

Don't we already have enough of a legacy in this state of ignoring the basic rights of our fellow citizens, as we allow the privileged few to prosper? Is short-term gain literally worth risking the health and wellbeing of hundreds of thousands of our own people - and the good name of the University?

When it happens, this will not be some accidental catastrophe that you can sweep under the rug. This will be a predictable, *preventable* consequence of your current decision-making process, and your name will be written all over it.

You will be responsible. And you will be held accountable.

This colossally bad idea, if allowed to move forward, will most certainly be kept under close and constant scrutiny. Unlike the Elk River spill in West Virginia, the relentlessly unfolding debacle at Shepherd Bend will be watched and monitored and reported, by people who know what to look for, and who know what to say. And unlike the TVA and Duke Energy spills, a public response and a legal plan of action will already be in place, ready for immediate release.

When the storm comes, when the banks erode at Shepherd Bend and the river turns foul, reporters will look back on this day and ask what you did to prevent the calamity - indeed, they will want to know why you allowed it to happen in the first place.

At that point, not only will we demonstrate that we did everything in our power to keep the disaster from happening - we will be more than forthcoming with the story that you did not.