

1 Year Later: TVA Still Cleaning UP Coal Ash Spill

by Daniel Potter

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It was just before Christmas last year when a massive coal ash retention pond gave way near Kingston, Tenn. An estimated one billion gallons of the gray material spilled into a river and inundated acres of sparsely-populated land. One year later, clean-up is going slower than expected and it's more expensive too.

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LINDA WERTHEIMER, host:

One year ago today, a huge, earthen dam burst outside Kingston, Tennessee. The dam was part of a holding pond for a power plant. And when it collapsed, it sent a torrent of coal ash into a river and smothered hundreds of acres in the countryside. Almost every day since, workers have scooped up thousands of tons of ash.

But one year into a clean up that's expected to cost a billion dollars, the Tennessee Valley Authority says it still doesn't know where it will put all that sludge. Daniel Potter of member station WPLN reports.

DANIEL POTTER: Work never ends at the Kingston site.

(Soundbite of beeping)

POTTER: Dredges siphon muck out of the Emory River into a channel, where massive yellow backhoes scoop out glistening piles of dark ash. The sludge is what's left over after coal is burned for energy and dumped in a holding pond.

The site employs hundreds, and Tennessee Valley Authority environmental manager Dennis Yankee says the cleanup is nonstop.

Mr. DENNIS YANKEE (Environmental Manager, Tennessee Valley Authority): Dredging is 24/6. What we're finding is the seventh day is a maintenance day. We've got all this equipment. Oil changes alone become pretty intimidating.

POTTER: TVA calls dredging the river the time-critical phase of the cleanup. The Environmental Protection Agency has found high levels of arsenic and selenium in the river. But the TVA says drinking water downstream is safe. Roane County residents like Doug Rose are skeptical.

Mr. DOUG ROSE (Volunteer Firefighter): I've noticed we'd cook something every now and then, the water would smell different when you'd cook it, even whatever you were cooking in.

POTTER: The volunteer firefighter says he's fished these rivers for years, but it's gotten harder to catch anything since the spill, and he sees fewer boats on the lake. And then there's the tap water at home.

Mr. ROSE: And we live maybe, what, 12 miles away from the steam plant, and it's bad our way. And, I mean, all the water goes the same direction.

POTTER: TVA expects to finish dredging the river by next spring. And by the end of the year, it will have shipped all that ash by train to a landfill in Perry County, Alabama. So far, Perry County is only getting the ash that spilled into the river. Another 1.4 million tons remain on land. TVA says it will clean that up, too, but hasn't yet decided what to do with the ash.

Mr. STEPHEN SMITH (Director, Southern Alliance for Clean Energy): That still is a significant, outstanding issue.

POTTER: That's Stephen Smith of the TVA watchdog group Southern Alliance for Clean Energy.

Mr. SMITH: We're now a year into this, and the fact that TVA continues to not have a long-term option for that I think is unacceptable.

POTTER: Smith also says the Environmental Protection Agency has not done enough since the accident to safeguard other holding ponds around the country. Last week, the EPA announced it would miss this year's deadline to issue new rules on coal ash.

Craig Zeller is EPA project manager at Kingston. He says the sheer magnitude of the spill needed to be stabilized before recovery could get underway.

Mr. CRAIG ZELLER (Kingston Project Manager, Environmental Protection Agency): Now, using those medical terms of triage, the patient's been stable, you know, and now we're working on, you know, getting it back to life. So it's back up and walking. And that's going to take a little bit of time.

POTTER: Zeller is overseeing the long-term restoration of native plants and animals to the site. He expects to be on the job for the next five years.

For NPR News, I'm Daniel Potter in Nashville.

(Soundbite of music)

WERTHEIMER: This is NPR News.