



Times-News

Coal and Water Don't Mix

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ECO NOTES

The Local Foods movement is catching fire throughout WNC and here in Henderson County. We've grown from one to six tailgate markets and many farms are doing a thriving business with their farmstands catering to locals and tourists alike. Although only a small percentage of food produced in WNC stays here, it looks hopeful that over time, this might change given the nutritional, economic and community benefits.

Why then, do we tolerate having our energy imported from out of the state and in some cases out of the country to power our homes and businesses? Here in WNC, over 60% of our energy comes from coal, 100% of that coal is imported. In fact, NC spends more on coal than any other state but Georgia, paying out nearly \$2.5 billion per year. That amounts to \$254 per person, the 3rd highest in the nation. Even worse, North Carolina ranked very low for energy efficiency programs. NC spending on ratepayer-funded energy efficiency programs per person was 75 cents. The national average is \$7.36. So not only do we rely on the most polluting energy source known to man for power, but we do very little about cutting our need for it.

Much of the coal produced for WNC comes from mountaintop removal which has led to the destruction of over 500 mountains and total devastation of over 2000 miles of streams. But the damage to ecosystems is not confined to Kentucky and West Virginia alone. Its happening right here, in our own backyard. Our closest coal-fired powerplant is in Skyland, run by Progress Energy. Although this plant contributes less to air pollution as a result of the recent installation of scrubbers, the end result is that over 100,000 tons of coal ash is produced that sits in two very large coal ash ponds near the French Broad River and major population centers.

As you might recall, 18 months ago, a coal ash pond breach led to 5 million cubic yards of coal ash overwhelming the Kingston neighborhood in Tennessee leading to massive destruction to a river and many communities. Coal in its natural state does little to affect the environment, but once its processed and burned, it leaves behind toxic heavy metals that have been directly related to cancer and neurological damage.

So what is the direct effect of coal ash to WNC? The Skyland coal ash ponds are unlined and therefore have the potential of leaching into groundwater. Tests done by Progress Energy have demonstrated that arsenic and other heavy metals found in groundwater for several years exceeded state standards by nearly 200 times the allowable rate. Secondly, coal ash has been flying into neighborhoods and getting into surface water which has the potential to cause major health problems for neighbors, especially children who have higher metabolisms and tend to play in streams where coal ash laden sediment could be found. And finally, given the proximity of the dams to the interstate, there is always the potential for some serious public safety issues.

What can you do? Coal ash is directly related to our high energy lifestyle. Numerous studies have shown that homeowners and businesses can easily cut their energy footprint by 20-30% by taking simple and often inexpensive energy efficiency steps. Buy your energy locally by taking advantage of the sun or the earth for your energy. Great tax incentives still exist for solar and geothermal installations. Additionally, the EPA is currently holding hearings around the nation concerning how coal ash is regulated. Currently coal ash is classified as nonhazardous waste, a misnomer if there ever was one. You can register your concerns with the EPA and ask that coal be regulated like the hazardous substance that it is. See ECO's website www.eco-wnc.org for details.

To learn more about energy efficiency and steps you can take, ECO is cosponsoring an informational workshop on Monday, September 27 at 7PM at the Patton Auditorium at Blue Ridge Community College. For more information about energy efficiency or about coal ash, contact ECO at 692-0385 or www.eco-wnc.org.



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