

Duke Energy illegally pumps millions of gallons of contaminated water into North Carolina river

By Matthew MacEgan
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The nation's largest electricity company, Duke Energy, has been cited by the State Department of Environmental and Natural Resources for the eighth time in less than a month for illegally pumping 61 million gallons of contaminated water from a coal ash pit into the Cape Fear River in North Carolina. On Tuesday, a federal grand jury began hearing evidence on whether North Carolina regulators intentionally turned a blind eye to the nefarious practices of the energy giant over the past several months.

Widespread attention was brought to the illegal pumping by the independent environmental group Waterkeeper Alliance, which took aerial photographs of two large pumps at the Cape Fear facility as they sucked water from coal ash dumps and spewed it into nearby woods and into a canal leading to the river. Public disgust over the incident precipitated a visit by state regulators to the plant the following day for a purportedly previously planned inspection.

Although these regulators say the pumping has been going on for months, no issue had been raised until after the release of the aerial photographs. Reportedly, Duke had notified state regulators by phone last August that the company would be performing "routine" maintenance that included using a temporary pumping system. State Water Quality Director Tom Reeder told reporters that "the pumping activities ongoing at this plant far exceeded what would reasonably be considered routine maintenance."

Southern Environmental Law Center attorney Frank Holleman stated in an interview, "Had the Waterkeeper Alliance not been inspecting that site, it's likely that no one would have known it was happening."

This incident, however, is just the latest of many that

have erupted over the past two months. On February 2, a pipe collapsed at another coal ash dump in nearby Eden, North Carolina, coating 70 miles of the Dan River with toxic materials. The coal ash dumps in Cape Fear and Eden are only two of three dozen dumps utilized by 14 of Duke's coal-fired power plants across the state.

In the wake of the February 2 incident, conservationists began drawing attention to the effects of the contamination to the mass media. Brian Williams, a conservationist with the Dan River Basin Association, brought a television news crew 20 miles downstream of the spill for a demonstration. He described how gray sludge began pouring into the river and explained how the coal ash is mixing with sediment on the bottom. Wildlife officials estimate that this layer of sludge, which carries chemicals known to cause cancer, spread as far as 80 miles from the Eden plant.

Coal ash is the sludge that is leftover when coal is burned to make electricity and contains arsenic, lead, mercury, and other heavy metals that are highly toxic to both humans and wildlife. The television news agency took three samples of the river bottom for testing in an independent lab. The test results found arsenic levels nine times higher than unaffected areas and double the amount of selenium, a metal that has been known to cause mutations in fish.

The Cape Fear plant is located just upriver of several cities in North Carolina, including Sanford, Dunn, Fayetteville, and Wilmington. Municipal officials in those communities have yet to report problems with drinking water. Duke Energy has not yet spoken to the media, but has issued this statement regarding the

illegal pumping activity: “We will do the right thing for the river and surrounding communities. We are accountable. Drinking water has remained safe. The pipe has been permanently plugged. We take responsibility for this event.”

The other seven citations issued to Duke Energy within the last month include two in regard to the Dan River spill and five others for plants that lack the permits legally required to discharge rainwater from such premises. Reportedly, Duke has not possessed any such permit since 2010, and this fact was known to the state regulators now under investigation by the federal government.

These recent dumpings could have detrimental effects on both humans and wildlife residing in the region. A farmer named Mike Powell who owns 100 acres of land located four miles south of the Eden plant explained to reporters that his main concern is river flooding, which happens intermittently throughout the spring. Powell explained that the contaminated water could cover his whole field, inundating his crops and land with poisonous sludge.

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