

# Tropical Storm Florence inundates toxic manure ponds, coal ash dumps in the Carolinas

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In the several days since hurricane Florence made landfall near the border between North and South Carolina, the storm's floodwaters have set one record after another. The storm's official death toll now stands at 32 and is expected to rise with entire cities inundated by flood waters.

The Cape Fear River in southeastern North Carolina was predicted to crest Wednesday at 62 feet in Fayetteville, several inches higher than the previous record following Hurricane Matthew in 2016. Elizabethtown, another city along the river, has seen 36 inches of rainfall from Florence, and many nearby cities have seen 30 inches.

The Little River, which flows into the Cape Fear in Fayetteville, also exceeded its previous record from Matthew of 32 feet, reaching 36 feet. Most of downtown Fayetteville remains underwater as of this writing. Further west, the Lumber River is expected to crest Wednesday, also at record levels.

One of the largest poultry farm operators in North Carolina, reported that 1.7 million chickens have drowned in Florence's deluge and 6 million more are at risk of starving to death after being cut off by flood waters. An as yet unknown number of hogs have also drowned. Some thousands were killed by flooding from Hurricane Floyd in 1999.

In addition to the immediate toll on human and animal life, flooding from Florence presents widespread danger to public health as hundreds of manure ponds—open-air septic tanks used in pork and poultry farming—are beginning to overflow from heavy rainfall. The manure ponds, or hog lagoons, hold animal waste while it decomposes, slowly turning it into fertilizer which is eventually pumped onto fields

for nearby crops.

North Carolina is the second largest hog farming state—behind only Iowa—with over 9 million hogs and 2,300 hog farms. Hog and poultry waste pits occupy 6,848 acres of land in the state. Smithfield Farms and parent company WH Group own the largest hog operations, generating nearly \$1 billion in profits last year.

Animal excrement spilling into rivers could contaminate drinking water with dangerous bacteria like salmonella and E. coli, both of which can be lethal. This danger is most acute in rural areas where residents draw water from private wells.

In larger spills, livestock waste can fill affected waters with enough nitrate and phosphate-rich matter to cause algae blooms in swamps and rivers. This process starves aquatic life of oxygen, creating “fish kills” in rivers, estuaries and even coastal waters where seafood production could suffer for years.

On Sunday the Associated Press published images of a hog farm outside Trenton with a waste pit overrun with floodwaters. The N.C. Pork Council, an industry trade group, initially denied there had been any reports of spills and subsequently tried to assure reporters that all spills were minimal.

North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality Secretary Michael Regan told a press conference Monday that the earthen dam at one hog waste lagoon in Duplin County had failed. He acknowledged reports of seven lagoons overflowing in Jones and Pender counties and four others that were inundated.

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) largely allows hog farms to self-regulate, with only an estimated 33 percent of Concentrated Animal Feeding

Operations, or CAFOs, operating with a point source pollution permit pursuant to the Clean Water Act. Likewise, North Carolina state regulations generally require waste lagoons be able to withstand 25-year floods, which have proven insufficient since 1999 when Hurricane Floyd swamped 50 such installations. Flooding from Florence now approaches 1,000-year levels.

Sixteen lagoons flooded during Hurricane Matthew in 2016 and environmentalists estimate that 62 industrial hog farms lie within North Carolina's 100-year floodplain.

In addition to the hazards of livestock waste, the region's main electrical power company, and the nation's largest, Duke Energy, has several coal ash sites in the coastal area affected by Florence. By Saturday, one coal ash landfill collapsed at the Sutton Power Station near Wilmington, spilling 2,000 cubic yards of pollution—enough to fill 180 dump trucks—into nearby Sutton Lake, which is surrounded on three sides by the Cape Fear River.

Coal ash contains high levels of toxic elements such as mercury, cadmium, chromium and arsenic. Exposure to coal ash can cause cancer, heart disease and neurological damage in children. Duke Energy owns all 31 coal ash disposal pits and ponds in North Carolina. In 2014, a broken stormwater pipe flooded a Duke Energy pit in Eden, North Carolina, dumping 39,000 tons of coal ash into the Dan River. The company pleaded guilty to criminal negligence under provisions of the Clean Water Act and accepted obligations to overhaul drinking water piping in parts of North Carolina.

In January, Duke Energy agreed to pay a mere \$84,000 in fines for leaky coal ash sites polluting the Catawba and Broad Rivers.

At the HF Lee power plant in Goldsboro, where more than 20 inches of rain fell, the Neuse River has flooded three older coal ash disposal sites which are now overgrown with trees. The company makes the specious claim that the overgrowth will prevent spillage into the river.

In Conway, South Carolina, National Guard crews rushed on Monday to bolster a coal ash containment pit near the Waccamaw River, placing giant sand bags and other material around the site. South Carolina's rivers are expected to crest later in the week as storm waters

flow toward the coast. A spill in the Waccamaw river could have a catastrophic impact on the critical estuaries of Winyah Bay, a major spawning area for a number of aquatic species including shrimp.

In total, the EPA's Priorities List has more than 70 sites in the Carolinas, including former chemical plants, pesticide dumps and at least one former smelting operation near the coast.

The devastating impact of Florence in North and South Carolina—two of the most “business friendly” states in the country—demonstrates the immense costs of deregulation on the one hand and the need for socialist planning and public ownership of industry on the other. For years, the states' governments have courted business investment with the promise of low wages, low taxes and a virtually non-existent regulatory environment.

While large portions of these states face saturation with carcinogenic neurotoxins and fecal matter, two individuals who have both fostered this political environment and profited handsomely from it are Charles and David Koch, whose estimated combined fortune stands at over \$100 billion dollars. By contrast, the entire 2018-2019 budget for the state of North Carolina is \$23.9 billion. South Carolina's legislature is discussing a budget of around \$8 billion.

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