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MOBILE RIVER

THREAT: Coal ash pollution

STATE:

Alabama

AT RISK:

Clean water, public health, biodiversity, groundwater

SUMMARY

A haven of biodiversity, the Mobile River watershed accounts for fourteen percent of all freshwater flowing in the U.S. However, the river is threatened by a leaking coal ash pond at Alabama Power's Plant Barry, which contains more than 21 million tons of toxic coal ash. Pollution from the coal ash pit threatens the health and well-being of the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, Mobile Bay, the historic African-American community of Africatown, the City of Mobile and the Port of Mobile. In order to protect clean water and public health, and save the Mobile River from catastrophic pollution, Alabama Department of Environmental Management and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency must require the removal and remediation of coal ash from the Plant Barry site and the banks of the Mobile River.

PLANT BARRY ON THE MOBILE RIVER

PHOTO: CADE KISTLER, MOBILE BAYKEEPER

THE RIVER

The Tombigbee and Alabama Rivers join to form the Mobile River approximately 50 miles northeast of Mobile, Alabama. The Mobile River flows south in a winding course eventually forming the eastern boundary of the historically important community Africatown, founded by the last known group of enslaved Africans illegally brought to the United States in 1870. Eventually, the river reaches the Alabama State Port Authority's Port of Mobile industrial waterfront and Mobile Bay on the Gulf of Mexico.

The Mobile River has historically provided the principal navigational access for Alabama. The river basin is also important for its seafood industry, transportation, irrigation and recreation, such as fishing, boating, guided tours and kayaking. The Port of Mobile alone accounts for an estimated \$22 billion in total economic impact, while outdoor recreation provides \$7.5 billion in direct consumer spending. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designates 26 rivers and streams (approximately 1,093 miles) in the Mobile River Basin as critical habitat for threatened or endangered fish and wildlife. Due to this remarkably bio-diverse watershed, Alabama is home to more species of freshwater fish, mussels, snails, turtles and crawfish than any other state, many of which are found nowhere else on earth. The watershed provides habitat for more than 140 threatened or endangered species and covers most of the state of Alabama extending into Mississippi, Tennessee and Georgia.

THE THREAT

For decades, Alabama Power's Plant Barry has dumped 21 million tons of toxic coal ash into a 597-acre unlined pit only protected from the powerful Mobile River by an earthen levee—allowing heavy metals and other toxins to contaminate groundwater and migrate into the Mobile River watershed. Plant Barry's coal ash pit is surrounded on three sides by the Mobile River and sits in a floodplain of the river next to the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta, a hotspot for diverse plants, fish, birds and wildlife. Federal law now bans coal ash ponds located in these types of locations.

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MOBILE RIVER

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TAKE ACTION:

[AmericanRivers.org/
MobileRiver2022](https://www.AmericanRivers.org/MobileRiver2022)

MOBILE RIVER, ALABAMA

PHOTO: GEORGE DODD, SHUTTERSTOCK

Coal ash is the concentrated by-product of burning coal and contains contaminants such as radium, mercury, cadmium, arsenic, selenium and other carcinogens. According to a report compiled by Alabama Power, arsenic is currently seeping into the Mobile River's groundwater at levels 806 percent above the legal limit. It has also been well documented that the coal ash pond is currently polluting ground and surface water in the area with heavy metals. Additionally, the coal ash in the pits can and does become airborne, where it can be inhaled and deposited into the soil and water. With climate change, rising sea levels and more extreme storms, including hurricanes, in this region, leaving coal ash in an unlined pit below the water table is akin to a ticking time bomb.

Despite a public outcry, Alabama Power has decided to cap-in-place the unlined coal ash pit—leaking toxic chemicals that impair the health of people and the environment in perpetuity,

instead of digging up the coal ash, remediating the site and moving it to a safer lined landfill away from water. This move to safer practices is happening with 250 million tons of coal ash in states throughout the Southeast, including Virginia, North and South Carolina, Tennessee and Georgia. It is time for Alabama to take this same action to safeguard clean water.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

Alabama's Department of Environmental Management and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) must compel Alabama Power to follow the Coal Combustion Residuals (i.e., coal ash) rule and excavate and remove the coal ash at Plant Barry to a modern, lined landfill away from the river's edge that does not allow any infiltration of water into the coal ash or leaching of coal ash into groundwater. The state must also require a fence-line air monitor at Plant Barry to determine the amount of coal ash that is becoming airborne. Furthermore, the state should require all utilities to excavate and remove coal ash where it remains in contact with groundwater.

On the federal level, the EPA should not approve Alabama's Coal Combustion Residuals permitting program until the state requires that coal ash be removed from any groundwater connection and denies utility closure plans that propose to leave coal ash in contact with groundwater. In addition, on the national scale, EPA should halt utilities' decisions to cap-in-place unlined coal ash surface impoundments leaking into the groundwater, not only on the Mobile River at Plant Barry but on more than 200 rivers across the country that are impacted by this practice. Lastly, EPA should revise the Federal Regulations for Coal Combustion Residuals to include:

- Regulating coal ash as "hazardous waste" instead of "nonhazardous waste"
- Protecting groundwater from coal ash contamination and maintaining EPA's position that unlined coal ash surface impoundments cannot be capped-in-place with coal ash in contact with groundwater
- Finalizing a federal permitting program for the disposal of coal ash
- Managing ideal safe timelines for excavation, coal ash removal and remediation and closure of Coal Combustion Residual unlined surface impoundments
- Reviewing state-level coal ash program applications to ensure they are as protective as federal regulations; and
- Protecting waterfront communities from industrial pollution by minimizing contaminants released into the environment and ensuring communities near these sites have access to safe water for drinking and recreation.