

Georgia's coal ash cleanup controversies, explained

A primer on which agencies are responsible for coal ash monitoring, disposal, and cleanup — and what it costs Georgia Power customers.



Georgia Power's coal-fired Plant Scherer in Juliette, Ga. *AP Photo/Branden Camp*

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This story is part of a collaboration with Grist and WABE to demystify the Georgia Public Service Commission, the small but powerful state-elected board that makes critical decisions about everything from raising electricity bills to developing renewable energy.

In 2019, when Georgia Power retired Plant Hammond — a 65-year-old coal-burning facility near Rome — it was more than a matter of shutting down some machinery and flipping off the lights. There was also the question of what to do with the millions of tons of coal ash, a toxic byproduct of the combustion process, that sat in unlined ponds there on the banks of the Coosa River. According to a plan from Georgia Power, the contents of three of those ponds would be removed and put in lined landfills elsewhere. But the coal ash in a fourth pond, deep enough that it touches groundwater, would be capped and left in place.

The state's Environmental Protection Division, or EPD, gave this plan the go-ahead last fall, leading to pushback both from environmental advocates and from the Environmental Protection Agency, the federal body with authority over coal ash disposal.

doubt and revealing both the difficulty of getting rid of coal ash waste and the alphabet soup of government agencies and regulatory schemes involved.

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It's not just Hammond. Georgia Power is in the process of retiring almost all of its coal-fired power plants, raising big questions about how to dispose of the toxic waste they've generated over decades in operation. Here's a primer on why coal ash matters, how Georgia Power plans to clean it up — and what it'll cost ratepayers.

Where does coal ash come from, and what's the problem with it?

As it moves to less carbon-intensive energy sources, Georgia Power says it intends to shutter all but one of its coal-fired power plants by 2028. In the process, it needs to figure out what to do with the estimated 92 million tons of coal ash the plants have produced as they've burned coal, much of which is currently stored on-site in coal ash ponds — reservoirs where the waste is submerged in water.

Coal ash contains at least 17 heavy metals, some of which are neurotoxins and carcinogens, including mercury, cadmium, and arsenic. Still, it is not classified as a hazardous waste, so it can be disposed of in landfills and waterways, and recycled into products

According to a 2022 report by major environmental groups using the industry's own data, 91 percent of coal plants pollute groundwater above federal health standards with toxic pollutants. Near Plant Scherer — the largest coal-fired plant in North America, located in Juliette, Georgia — tests of well water have revealed the presence of these pollutants.

Georgia Power oversees 29 coal ash ponds across 11 sites. The company plans to fully remove the ash from 20 of those ponds — “closure by removal,” as Georgia Power says — and either transport it to lined landfills elsewhere or recycle it into construction materials like cement and cinder block. (Georgia Power says 85 percent of the ash it produces can be repurposed this way.) With the other nine, though, the plan is to seal the ash ponds on top and leave them where they are.

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strategy could lead to the contamination of groundwater and the pollution of nearby waterways, and that state approval of the unlined storage plan could set a worrying precedent.

How should coal ash be disposed of?

According to a [2022 analysis by Earthjustice](#), 94 percent of coal ash ponds in the U.S. are unlined. Ideally, advocates and researchers say, coal ash should be stored dry, in lined landfills that don't come into contact with water, since water can cause contaminants to leach into the surrounding environment. In 2015, the EPA issued a set of guidelines for the disposal of coal ash — or, in agency lingo, coal combustion residuals. Those rules were a “big watershed moment,” said Jesse Demonbreun-Chapman, the executive director of the Coosa River Basin Initiative, which has criticized Georgia Power's plans at Plant Hammond.

“The 2015 federal guidelines are very clear and plainspoken in their intent, and that is: We can't keep storing coal ash in water,” he said. “And so, if you know the coal ash is sitting in groundwater, that is a violation of the federal regulation.”

While the EPA sets the standards, it allows states to supervise plans for coal ash disposal. State-approved disposal plans, [the EPA says](#), must be “at least as protective as federal regulations currently in place.” Georgia is one of three states that sets its own standards. The permitting process is overseen by the EPD, an arm of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

Does Georgia meet the EPA's standards?

regulations, though, the state approved a plan in November 2023 to cap the fourth pond and leave it in place — not remove it to someplace safer, as advocates hoped. The first of its kind approved by the EPD, the permit has been seen as a “bellwether” for how the agency may consider other coal ash disposal plans at other decommissioned power plants around the state.

According to a 2022 ProPublica investigation, Georgia Power pressured the state to commit to a narrow interpretation of a key word in the EPA rule: “infiltration.” The state’s environmental division interprets this to prohibit the infiltration of water from above, or rainwater, but not water that might leak laterally or from below. In late June, the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals rejected that argument in a lawsuit brought by utility companies to challenge the EPA’s coal ash rule, as Grist reported.

Last fall, the EPA sent a letter to the Georgia EPD warning that the unlined ponds might not comply with federal regulations; this spring, it rejected a similar cap-in-place plan in Alabama. Georgia Power has rejected criticisms, saying, “We have consistently said, and continue to maintain, that our ash pond closure plans are designed to comply with both the federal and state [coal waste disposal] rules.” The EPD says plans are in place to monitor the areas around unlined coal ash ponds and take corrective actions as necessary.

What is statewide coal ash cleanup costing Georgia Power customers?

EPD, following EPA standards, works out the environmental-impact aspects of coal ash disposal — but the PSC determines how much of the cost of that disposal can be covered by ratepayers. In 2019, the PSC voted to allow Georgia Power to pass the cost of coal ash disposal on to its customers on their electricity bills. Total coal ash cleanup costs are estimated to be at least \$8.96 billion as of 2022, up from Georgia Power’s \$7.6 billion estimate that was approved by the PSC in 2019.

The coal ash cleanup fee is included in a line item on customers’ bills called “Environmental Compliance Cost Recovery.” The total environmental compliance fee is calculated as roughly 12 percent of the base bill; according to the PSC, coal ash cleanup is about 17 percent of that 12 percent. So, for example: If a bill is \$100, the environmental compliance fee will come in around \$12, with about \$2 of that going to coal ash cleanup. The rest covers other costs related to federal regulations, like scrubbers on coal plants.

The Sierra Club sued to block the decision to charge customers, but the case ended in 2022 after the Georgia Supreme Court declined to hear it. For critics, there are two intersecting problems. One is that Georgia Power is passing coal ash cleanup costs along to customers; the other is that Georgia Power isn’t doing a good enough job of the actual cleanup.

“You cannot ask ratepayers to pay for substandard closure,” Demonbreun-Chapman said. “If you’re saying it costs this many hundreds of millions of dollars to cap these ash ponds in place, you should not be able to recover that from ratepayers with the

The PSC regulates not just Georgia Power's electricity rates but its operations more broadly, including plans to close coal plants and how soon they go offline (coal still makes up 15 percent of its energy mix).

What agencies are involved in addressing coal ash, and how can I contact them?

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: The EPA website contains a clearinghouse of information related to coal ash, the rules governing its disposal, and specific spills, as well as a way to contact the agency with questions or concerns.

Georgia Environmental Protection Division: The EPD provides state-specific information on coal ash on its own website, where you can enter your email address to sign up for updates; use this page to contact the division.

Georgia General Assembly: In the legislature, the House Natural Resources & Environment Committee and the Senate Natural Resources and the Environment Committee oversee coal ash cleanup and can be contacted through their respective websites. You can also contact your own state legislators.

Nonprofits: Georgia Coal Ash, run by a coalition of environmental and social justice groups, sends out email updates on the subject along with opportunities to take action, and its website contains a wealth of resources and links to detailed reports. The Georgia Water Coalition, which includes the Southern Environmental Law Center, the Georgia River Network,

Altamaha Riverkeeper has been especially involved in monitoring pollution around Plant Scherer, and the Coosa River Basin Initiative is the go-to for information about Plant Hammond.

PSC: The main avenues of PSC regulation are its approval of the integrated resource plan, a 20-year strategy that Georgia Power is required to revise every three years, and the rate case, a subsequent decision-making process where commissioners determine how much consumers will pay (and how much profit will go back to investors in Georgia Power, a private company with a “regulated monopoly” on the state’s electricity market). Here’s how you can contact the PSC.

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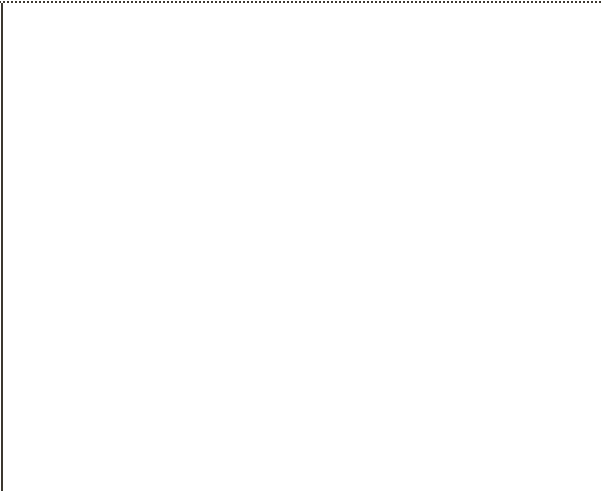
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