

Status of ash pond extension causing uncertainty for Clifty Creek

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Indian Kentucky Electric Corporation's Clifty Creek Power Plant in Madison.

An announcement that the Environmental Protection Agency is taking action to address unlined and potentially leaking coal ash ponds at coal-burning power plants in four states could lead to some uncertainty about the future of the Clifty Creek Generating Station in Madison.

“There’s been a lot of speculation but there’s no new update,” said Scott Blake, a spokesman for American Electric Power, which he said has the largest percentage of ownership in a consortium of power facilities including Ohio Valley Electric Corporation and its wholly owned subsidiary, Indiana-Kentucky Electric Corporation.

On Jan. 11, Barry N. Breen, acting assistant administrator for the Office of Land and Emergency Management, signed a notice for a proposed denial of an alternative closure deadline for coal ash pits at the Clifty Creek Power Station. The EPA's notice states that IKEC had filed an extension on April 11, 2021 asking for an extension of a proposed closure of the Madison plant's West Boiler Slag Pond on Dec. 5 and a Landfill Runoff Collection Pond on April 23, 2023.

Blake said the issue is currently in a comment period from Jan. 25 to Feb. 23 in which the utility may respond and make its case on how it is addressing issues outlined by the Environmental Protection Agency. Once comments are submitted, Blake said there's no certainty on how long it will take for the EPA to respond.

Blake also said "no decision" has been made by American Electric Power on the future of the Madison plant if the coal ash pit closure does go into effect.

"These are complex issues and topics," said Blake, noting that it took several months for IKEC to receive last week's notification of the proposed decision. "We don't know how long it will take for them to evaluate and make a decision. A lot of the timeline is fluid at this point," he said. "We will show them a plan that we are putting forth" that "remedies are underway" as they work to satisfy the concerns by the EPA.

In addition to the notice sent to Clifty Creek, the Associated Press reported last week that separate letters of denial were sent to the James M. Gavin plant in Cheshire, Ohio, and the Ottumwa plant in Ottumwa Iowa. The H.L. Spurlock plant in Maysville, Kentucky, will be required to fix groundwater monitoring as a condition for continued operation of its coal ash pond, the EPA said.

The actions mark the first time the EPA has enforced a 2015 rule aimed at reducing groundwater pollution from coal-fired power plants that has contaminated streams, lakes and underground aquifers. Coal ash, the substance that remains when coal is burned to generate electricity, contains a toxic mix of mercury, cadmium, arsenic and other heavy metals, and has been cited for polluting waterways, poisoning wildlife and causing respiratory illness among those living near massive ponds where the waste is stored.

Last week, EPA Administrator Michael Regan cited the importance of ensuring that coal ash ponds meet strong environmental and safety standards and that operators of industrial facilities are held accountable. "I've seen firsthand how coal ash contamination can hurt people and communities," said Regan, a former North Carolina environmental regulator who negotiated with Duke Energy what state officials say was the largest cleanup agreement for toxic coal ash. For too long, communities already

disproportionately impacted by high levels of pollution have been burdened by improper coal ash disposal,” Regan said.

The EPA on Tuesday reiterated its “consistently held position that surface impoundments or landfills cannot be closed with coal ash in contact with groundwater.” Limiting contact between coal ash and groundwater after closure is critical to minimizing contaminants released into the environment and will help ensure communities near the sites have access to safe water for drinking and recreation, the EPA said.

Michelle Bloodworth, president and CEO of America’s Power, a trade association that represents coal-fired utilities, said the group was reviewing the EPA’s announcement. “On its face it doesn’t make sense to shut down prematurely coal plants that provide the security of on-site fuel storage or serve as an alternative when prices of natural gas and other sources spike” or are not available, she said.

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