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Clash in Alabama Over Tennessee Coal Ash

By SHAILA DEWAN

UNIONTOWN, Ala. — Almost every day, a train pulls into a rail yard in rural Alabama, hauling 8,500 tons of a disaster that occurred 350 miles away to a final resting place, the Arrowhead Landfill here in Perry County, which is very poor and almost 70 percent black.

To county leaders, the train's loads, which will total three million cubic yards of coal ash from a massive spill at a power plant in east Tennessee last December, are a tremendous financial windfall. A per-ton "host fee" that the landfill operators pay the county will add more than $3 million to the county's budget of about $4.5 million.

The ash has created more than 30 jobs for local residents in a county where the unemployment rate is 17 percent and a third of all households are below the poverty line. A sign on the door of the landfill's scale house says job applications are no longer being accepted — 1,000 were more than enough.

But some residents worry that their leaders are taking a short-term view, and that their community has been too easily persuaded to take on a wealthier, whiter community's problem. "Money ain't worth everything," said Mary Gibson Holley, 74, a black retired teacher in Uniontown. "In the long run, they ain't looking about what this could do to the community if something goes wrong."

County leaders, who are mostly black, bristle at accusations of environmental injustice, saying that the ash is perfectly safe and that criticism has been fostered by outsiders, or even competitors who wanted the ash disposal contract for themselves.

"That's the means to their end, that they can keep it out of black communities on the charge of environmental racism," said Albert Turner Jr., a black county commissioner, inviting a visitor to sniff a sample of the heavy, mudlike ash in a souvenir glass jar. "They would benefit on the backs of the stupidity of African-Americans who let this trail of money get away."

Bob Deacy, vice president of clean strategies and project development for the Tennessee Valley Authority, whose Kingston Fossil Plant was the site of the ash spill that covered almost 300 acres

of land and waterways, said Arrowhead was chosen because it was reachable by train instead of truck, because it underbid other sites and because, unlike closer landfills, it had the capacity to handle all the ash.

The Environmental Protection Agency, which is overseeing the cleanup and is supposed to ensure that its own decisions do not harm minority communities, defended its approval by saying that the site was "isolated" and that six local elected officials, including a majority of the county commissioners, "strongly supported" the ash contract.

Even environmentalists acknowledge that the site, in Perry County, is in many ways ideal. Most of the problems from coal ash, which contains toxins like arsenic and lead that have contaminated the water supply at more than 60 sites nationwide, come from wet, unlined ponds like the one that ruptured in Tennessee. It is far better, environmentalists say, that the ash should go somewhere like Arrowhead, a dry storage site dug into a nearly impermeable bed known as the Selma chalk, some 600 feet above the water table, lined with clay and polymer and equipped with a leachate collection system to suck up any water that filters through the ash and dislodges contaminants.

But in Perry County, a lack of trust has permeated the debate. Residents said they feared equipment failure, flooding, tornadoes or lack of oversight at the landfill, where the Alabama Department of Environmental Management, whose notably lax regulation of coal ash permits most landfills to use it as a cover material for other waste, will be responsible for enforcement.

Many said they did not believe the assertions by local officials that the ash was perfectly safe, particularly after one councilman insisted, contrary to widely publicized test results that showed dangerous levels of arsenic, that it contained no arsenic whatsoever.

"I won't feel comfortable," wrote W. Compson Sartain, a columnist for The Perry County Herald, "until I see a delegation from E.P.A. and T.V.A. standing on the courthouse square, each member stirring a heaping spoonful of this coal ash into a glass of Tennessee river water this stuff has already fallen into, and gargling with it."

Robert Bamberg, a white catfish farmer and the organizer of Concerned Citizens of Perry County, a biracial group of landfill opponents, said the group had identified 212 residences within 1.5 miles of the site. "We're being taken advantage of by several groups of powers that be," Mr. Bamburg said. "There's a sense among the population that we've been thrown under the bus."

It has proved difficult for the voters to exert their influence. Even before the coal ash came to town, two pro-landfill commissioners were voted out of office on a tide of anger from residents who felt that the 1,400-acre project had been shoved through with little public comment.

One of the new commissioners was Fairest Cureton, a black high school teacher who ran on an anti-landfill platform. Since taking office in 2007, and since landfill managers flew him and other officials to the site of the ash spill in Roane County, Tenn., on a private plane, Mr. Cureton, now the chairman of the commission, has adjusted his thinking.

"This gives us an opportunity to fund our schools, to help build our roads, to create some things in Perry County that will enhance the lives of individuals," Mr. Cureton said.

James Murdock, a black minister who catches whiffs of the landfill on evening walks with his wife, Ella, said he felt betrayed by such turnabouts. "You don't even know who to vote for anymore," he said.

Mr. Cureton reasoned that the ash, a byproduct of burning coal to produce electricity, could not be more dangerous than the remnants of the coal that heated his schoolroom growing up, or the ash his father, a farmer, sprinkled at the base of his fruit trees.

But coal ash from a power plant has a higher concentration of toxins because mercury, arsenic and other substances that are filtered out by air pollution controls end up in the ash. Since the spill in Tennessee, the Environmental Protection Agency has promised to issue new regulations for coal ash, potentially classifying it as a hazardous waste.

Mr. Cureton replaced Johnny Flowers, who had been a commissioner for 18 years, and is proud of his efforts to bring development, including the landfill and a privately run prison (a third major employer is a catfish feed plant), to Perry County. Mr. Flowers, who like Mr. Cureton is black, said he did not mind his defeat at the polls because he had done what he thought was right. "The community," he said, "don't know what's good for them."

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