

ATTACHMENT B

'Serious danger' looms at lake; erase it

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Right next to Charlotte's drinking water supply sit two giant lagoons. Stagnating in these lagoons are nearly 3 million tons of muck. The muck is ash from Duke Energy's nearby coal-burning power plant, and it contains chemicals such as arsenic, cobalt, manganese, iron and boron.

Environmental groups say – and Duke Energy concedes – that chemicals are seeping out of the lagoons and into Mountain Island Lake.

Duke says it's a small amount and no big deal.

The state of North Carolina says otherwise. The state added Duke's Riverbend plant to an existing lawsuit last week. Pushed by environmental groups, the state contends that contamination from Duke's lagoons, if not addressed, "poses a serious danger to the health, safety and welfare of the people of North Carolina and serious harm to the water resources of the state."

This is a welcome development for anyone at all nervous about storing poisonous coal ash in perpetuity next to a lake that supplies drinking water to some 800,000 people. The suit should prompt Duke to do the right thing, which would be to remove the ash and store it in a lined landfill away from the water supply. That is what South Carolina Electric & Gas is doing with 2.4 million tons of coal ash at its power plant on the Wateree River in South Carolina after it faced a similar legal challenge.

The Charlotte area has reason to hope that's how this suit will play out. Duke Energy CEO Jim Rogers, after all, told Charlotte Magazine this month, "We'll ultimately end up cleaning up all that," referring to the Riverbend ash ponds.

But "ultimately" could be a long time from now. Duke closed the Riverbend plant last month but wants to keep the coal ash there and monitor it indefinitely.

That would be cheaper than moving it to lined landfills. It would also be riskier. Ash ponds bursting open and spilling tons of coal ash in Tennessee and Wisconsin suggest the danger of this approach. And even absent that, the arsenic and other chemicals would continue to seep and possibly contaminate groundwater.

Duke contends the seepage is normal and hasn't hurt the lake's overall water quality. Mecklenburg County and Duke University scientists have found arsenic in Mountain Island Lake, but the drinking water is safe at the moment. Still, the Russian Roulette of leaving it there and crossing your fingers is not a long-term solution.

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Frank Holleman, a senior attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center, points out that the cost of moving the ash could end up looking cheap compared with the alternative. "If there were a catastrophic failure at Mountain Island Lake," Holleman told the Observer editorial board, "the legal, financial and reputational damage to the corporation and its officers would be staggering. It's an extreme corporate risk."

Cleaning it up, on the other hand, would protect Charlotte's water supply and, perhaps, burnish Duke's image and Rogers' legacy. Duke has been a responsible corporate citizen in this region for decades. Let's hope it continues to be.



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