Toolkit: Protecting Hoosiers from Coal Ash Pollution

This toolkit provides information and resources for Hoosiers to ensure that IDEM and EPA protect our communities and environment from the harms of coal ash pollution.

You can find EPA's proposed approval of Indiana's request to oversee coal ash permitting **HERE**.

Use this information to educate yourself, engage your community, and advocate for strong protections against coal ash contamination at **EPA's public hearing on November 12, 2026**.

Please share this information with others who might care about coal ash in our communities.

Points of Contact:

- **Hoosier Environmental Council**: Indra Frank (coalash@hecweb.org)
- **Earthjustice**: Lauren Piette (lpiette@earthjustice.org)

Submitting Comments & Registering to Testify:

- **Written comments to EPA must be submitted by November 16, 2026**. Submit a written comment **HERE**.

- **A hybrid (virtual and in-person) public hearing will occur on November 12, 2026 starting at 2pm ET**. The in-person hearing will be at:

  Indiana Government Center – South
  Wabash Hall Conference Rooms 4 and 5
  302 West Washington Street
  Indianapolis, IN 46204

- To speak, please pre-register by November 10, 2026 **HERE**. If you don't pre-register in advance you should still show up – EPA will let people request to speak at the hearing if there's time. It is critically important that community voices are heard!

Regulating Indiana's Coal Ash Dumps

On September 16, EPA proposed to approve Indiana's request to handle permitting and enforcement of federal coal ash requirements. To get this approval, Indiana and the Indiana Department of Environmental Management (IDEM) in particular, must show that its coal ash

program is “at least as protective” as the federal standards. And protections can’t just exist on paper, “each unit” in Indiana must be held accountable to federal standards.

EPA is proposing to approve IDEM’s application even though Indiana’s regulations are weaker than federal regulations in several important ways. EPA also proposes to approve IDEM’s application without considering IDEM’s track record of allowing dangerous coal ash contamination.

Testifying at the public hearing and providing written comments on the proposal will let EPA and IDEM know that Hoosiers will hold them accountable to protecting our health, our water, and our environment.

Tips for your Testimony

- Testimony is limited to 5 minutes.
    - Remember this formula: 1 minute = 150 words

- In-Person Public Hearing: Write your comments down or bring notes. Practice your testimony so that you know it is no longer than five minutes. An average person can read 750 words in five minutes.

- Virtual Public Hearing: Follow the same tips as above. You can read your comments into the speaker on your computer or your phone.

- Make it personal.
    - Speak about your experiences and those of your community.
    - Express your personal concerns.
    - Don’t worry if your comments aren’t “technical” — you don’t need to be a scientific expert for your comments to matter.
    - Do tell EPA your specific concerns — about your community, about a particular coal plant, or concerns related to drinking water, health, or recreation.

- End with an “ask.”
    - Demand that EPA do its job to protect you, your community, your environment, and the health and environment of the generations that will follow you.

Sample Testimony

Introduction

“Hello, my name is [my name] and I am from [my hometown]. I am a member of the [organization]. Thank you for this opportunity to testify.”

Your Personal Story

This is a very important part of your testimony. Use the prompts below to provide details about how you are personally hurt by coal ash pollution.

Tell your story, especially how close you live to a coal plant or water polluted by a coal plant, or how pollution from a coal plant hurts your quality of life. For example,

- Do you avoid boating, swimming, or fishing in a local waterway near a coal plant?
- Are you afraid to eat fish caught near a coal plant?
- Are you worried that coal ash is polluting your drinking water?
- Are you concerned that the structure holding a coal ash pond near you will fail?
- Does toxic dust blow from a nearby coal ash landfill or pond?
- Are you concerned that the owner of the coal plant will leave without cleaning up contamination, harming the community for generations to come?
- Are you concerned about the value of your property if the plant never cleans up its coal ash?
- Are you concerned about the health of your family, your children, your grandchildren?

Key Talking Points

Consider including a few points from the list below.

Conclusion

Here is the place for **YOUR ASK**.

- Demand that the EPA require Indiana to fix the problems with its coal ash program.
- Demand that EPA and IDEM hold coal ash polluters accountable!

Key Talking Points

- [Commenters are encouraged to talk as specifically as possible about how coal ash affects them.]

- Indiana has more coal ash dumps than any other state in the country. Over 100 coal ash landfills and ponds at more than 20 power plant sites contain roughly 134 million cubic yards of toxic coal ash. That's equivalent to a football field piled nearly *12 miles* high with coal ash. That's twice as high as Mount Everest!

- Some of the most egregious coal ash contamination in the country has happened under IDEM's watch. Decades of unchecked pollution from coal ash generated at NIPSCO's Michigan City coal plant contaminated the Town of Pines' drinking water, leading EPA to designate the town as a Superfund site in 2002. Further, IDEM allowed the same plant to place about 2 million tons of toxic coal ash directly into Lake Michigan as structural fill, with no plans for removal.

- With EPA's approval, Indiana can take on responsibility for permitting and monitoring coal ash dumps in the state, but only if it does so in a way that is *at least* as protective as federal requirements. That is the law.

- The EPA rules still on the books require strong protections against coal ash pollution. Unless Indiana's permits incorporate those protections, communities and their water will still be threatened by dangerous coal ash contamination.

- Indiana's coal ash regulations are far less protective than the federal rules. For example, they could allow coal ash dumps to continue leaking contamination indefinitely after they close if IDEM doesn't act fast enough to disapprove of dangerous closure plans.

- Many previously closed ash dumps could be exempt from regulation even if the closure was substandard and the dumps are polluting.

- The vast majority of Indiana's coal ash dumps have no liner to prevent leaks of hazardous chemicals. At every coal plant in Indiana where owners provided monitoring results, coal ash is contaminating groundwater above federal safe drinking water standards with arsenic, cobalt, chromium, lead, lithium, molybdenum, and other toxic chemicals.

- Most of Indiana's coal ash is stored in the floodplain of either Lake Michigan or one of Indiana's major rivers. Structural failure at any of these sites could have catastrophic impacts on Indiana's water.

- Many Hoosiers rely on groundwater for drinking water, making it especially critical to protect Indiana's groundwater from coal ash contamination. According to water well data published by IDNR, approximately 500 private wells are within one mile of the 21 coal plants IDEM identified as having coal ash units.

- Coal ash is an environmental justice issue in Indiana. Of the 21 coal plants IDEM identified as having coal ash dumps, more than half are located in communities with a low-income population above the state average

Understanding Coal Ash

What is Coal Ash?

Coal ash, also known as coal combustion residuals (CCR), is the toxic sludge left behind when coal is burned for electricity. U.S. coal plants continue to produce approximately 70 million tons of coal ash annually. This waste contains a dangerous mix of heavy metals, carcinogens, and neurotoxins that threaten human health and the environment.

Toxic Components of Coal Ash

Coal ash contains at least 17 toxic heavy metals and pollutants, including:

- Arsenic: Causes bladder, skin, kidney, and lung cancer; also linked to heart disease, diabetes, and neurological damage
- Boron: Causes respiratory irritation and damage to kidneys, liver, brain, reproductive organs, and intestines

- Cadmium: Causes lung disease, kidney damage, and bone loss; linked to lung cancer and cardiovascular disease
- Chromium: Chromium VI is a known carcinogen; causes lung cancer and skin ulcers
- Cobalt: Associated with blood disease, thyroid damage, and other endpoints
- Lead: Particularly harmful to children, causing brain damage, developmental delays, and behavioral problems; no safe exposure level exists
- Lithium: Causes kidney damage, neurological damage, decreased thyroid function, and birth defects
- Mercury: Damages the nervous system, causing vision impairment, memory loss, seizures, and developmental delays in children
- Molybdenum: Causes gout-like symptoms in humans, and reproductive toxicity in laboratory animals.
- Radium and other radioactive materials: Increase cancer risk through long-term exposure
- Selenium: Causes reproductive failure and developmental deformities in fish and wildlife; linked to neurological damage
- Thallium: Associated with a long list of adverse health effects including liver and kidney damage and hair loss

Public Health Impacts

Contamination Pathways

- Groundwater Contamination: Over 90% of coal plants are polluting groundwater with toxins above EPA health standards. Unlined ponds allow heavy metals to leach into aquifers, contaminating drinking water wells.
- Surface Water Pollution: Coal ash contamination reaches rivers, streams, and lakes through runoff and spills, threatening drinking water sources for millions.
- Air Pollution: Wind carries toxic coal ash dust from disposal sites into nearby communities, where residents inhale dangerous particles.
- Soil Contamination: Coal ash used as fill material in construction projects contaminates soil at schools, playgrounds, parks, and residential areas.

Health Consequences

- Prolonged exposure to coal ash pollution affects every major organ system in the human body:
    - Cancer: Increased risk of lung, bladder, skin, kidney, and other cancers from arsenic, chromium, cadmium, and radioactive materials
    - Neurological Damage: Mercury and lead exposure cause cognitive deficits, developmental delays, memory loss, and behavioral problems, especially in children
    - Cardiovascular Disease: Arsenic and other toxins increase risk of heart disease, hypertension, and cardiac arrhythmia
    - Respiratory Illness: Lung disease, emphysema, asthma, and breathing complications from inhaling coal ash dust
    - Kidney and Liver Damage: Multiple heavy metals cause organ failure and chronic disease

    - Reproductive and Developmental Problems: Birth defects, reproductive failure, and developmental abnormalities

Environmental Impacts

Water Contamination

Coal ash poses a severe threat to water resources:

- At least 91% of coal plants are contaminating groundwater above federal safety standards
- At least 24 coal ash sites nationwide have contaminated more than 100 private drinking water wells
- Unlined coal ash ponds and landfills allow toxic metals to leach directly into aquifers
- When coal ash ponds fail catastrophically, millions of gallons of toxic sludge can contaminate rivers, streams, and drinking water supplies

Ecosystem Damage

Coal ash pollution devastates ecosystems:

- Fish kills and deformities: Selenium accumulation causes severe developmental abnormalities in fish and amphibians, eliminating entire local populations
- Wildlife poisoning: Animals drinking from or living near contaminated water sources suffer neurological damage and death
- Habitat destruction: Coal ash spills and contamination destroy wetlands, rivers, and terrestrial habitats

Environmental Justice Impacts

Disproportionate Burden on Vulnerable Communities

Coal ash pollution is an environmental justice crisis. Studies consistently show that coal ash disposal sites are disproportionately located in low-income communities and communities of color:

- 78% of African Americans live within 30 miles of a coal-fired power plant
- Coal ash facilities are 2.8 times more likely to be in communities with 50% or more non-white residents
- At six of the ten most contaminated coal ash sites, populations of people of color and/or low-income residents are higher than state averages
- Communities near the 75 worst-polluting coal plants have an average per capita income of $17,500, and nearly 53% are people of color

Additional Resources

- Interactive map of U.S. coal ash dumpsites: Use this map to understand where coal ash might be stored near you and how a given site may be impacted by the EPA's expansion of the federal Coal Ash Rule.
- Coal ash state fact sheets, including Indiana.