

Ice Buildup Caused Slurry Spill In WV

JONATHAN MATTISE, Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — A West Virginia creek turned black with 108,000 gallons of coal slurry because of ice buildup on a pipeline, environmental officials said Wednesday.

The ice tore a gasket around a slurry line valve, causing the malfunction that led to Tuesday's early morning spill, the State Department of Environmental Protection said in a news release. The spill is not expected to affect the public water supply, as the Jan. 9 chemical spill did for 300,000 West Virginians, said the release and officials from West Virginia American Water.

The nearest public water system is 115 miles downstream in Huntington, the release said.

The spill at Patriot Coal's Kanawha Eagle Prep Plant near Winifrede affected six miles of Fields Creek and some material flowed one-half mile into the Kanawha River before dissipating.

The slurry contains heavy metals and other toxins, and "when this much coal slurry goes into a stream, it wipes the stream out," said Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Randy Huffman.

It could take 10 to 14 days to clean the creek, added state environmental mining official Harold Ward. Thus far, however, Ward said he hadn't received any reports of fish kills. He said the company has set up barriers to stop flow into the Kanawha, and is using vacuum trucks and pumping water from the stream near its plant into settling ponds.

The state doesn't expect the spill to have a major impact on the Kanawha. Ward said there will be a biological survey of the creek, with first results likely available in a week and a half.

The plant is under state orders not to operate, unless it's related to cleaning up the spill, said environmental department spokesman Tom Aluise. Enforcement is pending against the company, Aluise said.

Huffman said the department has notified Mason County officials because of well fields about 75 miles away from the spill, as well other industries that draw water from the creek.

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