VA Plans Long-Term Review Of Coal Ash Spill

STEVE SZKOTAK, Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — Virginia is examining any potential long-term environmental damage from a North Carolina coal ash [1]spill [1] on the Dan River and will hold Duke Energy "fully accountable" if any is found, the director of the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality said Monday.

The department said sampling of public drinking supplies in Danville and South Boston have met or exceeded state and federal standards. The department now is turning to additional monitoring of water supplies and aquatic life to assess any damage over a period of several years.

The news from Director David K. Paylor was welcomed in Southside, a section of the state where the Dan River meanders along the North Carolina-Virginia state line and is a source of drinking water for Danville and South Boston.

Andrew Lester, executive director of the Roanoke River Basin Association, said while the river has shed the visible pollution of the Feb. 2 spill, mollusks and other marine life have washed up on the banks of the river since then.

"We don't know what that's coming from. We don't know if the ash is killing them or something else is going on," he said. "It's unusual to see."

The environmental department said its long-term monitoring with the federal government includes bottom-dwelling organisms that are part of the food chain. Bald eagles are among the many species that are part of that chain.

The monitoring will also seek to identify so-called heavy metals linked to the spill accumulated in fish tissue. Coal ash contains hazardous chemicals that include arsenic, lead and mercury. The results of that testing is expected soon.

The spill occurred in Eden, N.C., about 10 miles from Virginia, when a storm-water pipe running beneath a 27-acre coal ash dump collapsed. The spill coated 70 miles of the Dan River with a toxic gray sludge.

Last week, a federal judge said Duke Energy [2] must take immediate action to eliminate sources of groundwater contamination at its coal ash dumps. The ruling came from a complaint filed before the Eden spill.

Paylor said the Virginia monitoring is aimed at ensuring the long-term health of the Dan River following the Eden spill.

"We intend to hold Duke Energy fully accountable," he said in a statement. "It is likely that several years of monitoring will be required and we want to ensure that

people and the environment remain protected."

In cooperation with other state agencies, the environmental department is:

— Compiling historical monitoring data from the Dan to compare its water quality post-spill.

— Collecting water and sediment samples from the North Carolina line to an area southwest of South Boston.

— Posting signs along the river advising visitors to limit contact with coal ash.

Lester said local officials simply don't know all the implications of the spill.

"At this point we just don't have a good handle on the long-term impacts of this stuff," he said. "We just don't know."

On Friday, Attorney General Mark R. Herring said he met with Duke Energy representatives to learn more about the spill, what Duke is doing to ensure it isn't repeated and how the utility will take responsibility for short- and long-term impacts.

"We're glad to see that both the attorney general's office and the DEQ are taking an active stance in this whole issue," Lester said. "It's one of the biggest issues the state has faced in a long time."

Gov. Terry McAuliffe and members of his Cabinet have also contacted Duke and North Carolina officials and attended public meetings in Southside.

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