Illinois Increases Coal Ash Pond Inspections

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SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (AP) — The Illinois Department of Natural Resources said Thursday that it will increase inspections of coal-ash ponds in the wake of high-profile accidents that fouled waterways in other states, and implement other reforms in the division that oversees mining and oil and gas exploration.

DNR Director Marc Miller said the agency will visually inspect the structural integrity of Illinois' coal ash ponds "to protect our natural resources," after recent accidents in West Virginia and North Carolina polluted waterways with heavy metals and other contaminants.

Illinois has almost 90 coal-ash ponds, which hold much of the estimated 4.4 million tons of ash generated every year by the state's coal-burning power plants.

The state Pollution Control Board is gathering public input on rules proposed by the state Environmental Protection Agency that would require stricter monitoring of groundwater near coal-ash ponds throughout the state

Miller said the agency also will appoint a lawyer to focus on mining issues, collect more information from companies that want oil and gas permit and recommend the addition of two members of the public to boards that oversee mining and oil and gas activities.

The agency had come under fire from environmentalists and residents for what they consider lax oversight, and for appearing to advocate for industry at public meetings.

"I think these are really big first steps in turning the page on an era where the state simply protected coal at the expense of communities and the environment," said Jack Darin, director of the Illinois Sierra Club.

The DNR earlier this week said it settled a lawsuit brought by Attorney General Lisa Madigan over how it involves the public in the process of approving coal mining permits.

Madigan sued the DNR in 2007 after it approved a surface mine near the tiny Fulton County village of Banner despite complaints from residents about potential threats to their water supply. The DNR, which ultimately rejected the permit in 2012, now will notify the public when it first receives applications, require early environmental review and require applicants to participate in public hearings.

The reforms are meant to, "restore the integrity of this agency and allow for more public participation as we work towards becoming a national model for

transparency," Miller said in a written statement.

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