

March 16, 2010

Cass R. Sunstein, Administrator
Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs
Office of Management and Budget
Washington, D.C. 20503

Dear Administrator Sunstein,

You probably remember the tragic coal ash spill that devastated Harriman, Tennessee, but do you know that the cleanup efforts have created a second coal ash disaster?

Since you're playing a big role in how coal ash gets treated, I wanted to tell you the story of Uniontown, and invite you here to see it with your own eyes.

Since last May, wet coal ash from Harriman has been shipped down to a small, poor, community in Perry County, Alabama. At the landfill in Uniontown, the wet coal ash is mixed with household garbage – a practice that has never been done before. This mixture produces a new makeup of leachate that no one is equipped to handle.

Multiple times the landfill has tried to ship the leachate into sewer lagoons, making prisoners of everyone in the nearby community. The stink from the gases was so overwhelming that people put rags soaked with pine sol in their windows, just so they could sleep at night. It is no coincidence that one man died, and several others became extremely ill. After 68 notices of intent to sue, they stopped sending leachate to sewage lagoons, and I started wondering what they were going to do with it.

In the past, the landfill was pumping this toxic leachate over roads and down into public ditches at night. I photographed this and took samples from the roadside. The still water in these ditches has been tested to show arsenic levels much higher than safe drinking water. A horse got stuck in one of the ditches and dropped dead just a few days later. This same water is leaking into streams and rivers where people swim, fish, and recreate.

Trucks unload the ash within 200 feet away from people's homes. They are also intentionally washing off it off train cars and trucks into a stream. This leaves people like my friend Ruby Holmes without the slightest hope to plant a garden. Ruby points out that growing a garden is not just a pastime – people in this community raise their food. They raise cows for slaughter, not for pets. If they can't raise their food, what have we done to them?

The Alabama Department of Environmental Management, and EPA region 4 have both let us down terribly. I know that you have a role to play in how the EPA ends up dealing with coal ash. I've also read in the news that you have been meeting with many folks from the coal ash industry. It's time to see the other side of the story with your own eyes. People like Ruby needs to tell their stories. Will you come to Uniontown to listen and see what is going on?

Sincerely,

John Wathen