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LOCAL

NC is awash in tons of coal ash. So why did it OK storing imported ash from India?

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As Duke Energy continues a state-ordered cleanup of millions of tons of potentially toxic coal ash, an Ohio company won approval Tuesday to store even more ash imported from India in North Carolina.

North Carolina seems already awash in coal ash, which burst into public view with a 2014 spill into the Dan River.

The state ordered Duke to close dozens of storage basins in which the bulk of its 155 million tons of ash is stored, but the company wants customers to pay for the work. Duke expects ash cleanup in the Carolinas to ultimately cost $5.1 billion.

A request last month for a 14.9 percent rate hike, filed by one of Duke's two N.C. utilities, included partial costs of closing basins at eight power plants. The second utility, which serves Charlotte, expects to seek a rate increase this fall that will also include closure costs.

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A byproduct of burning coal to make electricity, ash poses both a social problem and a business opportunity.

Metals in ash, such as arsenic, can contaminate groundwater and threaten the health of people who drink it. Duke is working, under a legislative mandate, to run water lines or offer filtration systems to neighborhoods near its coal-burning power plants.

Lightweight fly ash is also a coveted ingredient in making concrete, a more durable replacement for Portland cement at half the cost. But North Carolina concrete producers say they can't get enough ash.

After years of complaints, state legislators ordered Duke to build three facilities that would process ash into a form that could be used in concrete. Last month Duke announced the last of those facilities, which will be built at power plants in Salisbury, Goldsboro and Moncure.

State law requires the three facilities, which will start operating in 2019 to 2020, to process 900,000 tons of ash a year from Duke's basins. The Charlotte-based Carolinas Ready Mixed Concrete Association estimates North Carolina concrete makers needed about 959,000 tons last year, far more than they got.

The move away from coal as a fuel by Duke and other power companies has only increased demand for ash, said association executive vice president Caroline Sutton. Concrete makers in South Carolina and Virginia also can't get enough ash, she said.

"We want North Carolina bridges, roads and structures to be built with N.C.-produced fly ash," Sutton said. "Importing fly ash from outside the state and overseas makes no sense when we have an abundance of coal ash that can be reprocessed right here in North Carolina."

Duke spokeswoman Erin Culbert said processing and transportation costs play roles in how it markets ash. Federal standards that require cleaner air emissions from its power plants can also make ash less usable in concrete, she said.

The 35 percent of ash Duke recycles each year, combined with the output of the three new processing plants, will likely exceed the amount of new ash Duke produces within three years, Culbert said.

Catawba Riverkeeper Sam Perkins said Duke's plan to leave ash in basins at six power plants, drained of water and capped, risks the health of nearby residents and wastes productive use of the ash.

"When we're talking about new contracts to bring in coal ash from halfway around the world, I think it's clear that we have unmet demand for the coal ash that's still here," Perkins said. The ash that Duke plans to leave in place at the Allen power plant in Gaston County, he said, could instead be used in concrete for upcoming construction projects in the area.

Concrete also figure into the plans of an Ohio company, Spartan Materials LLC.

The Council of State on Tuesday approved a two-year warehouse lease with Spartan to store 150,000 tons of fly ash imported from India at the state port in Morehead City. Spartan officials couldn't be reached Tuesday, but a North Carolina Ports official said the ash will go to concrete plants.

Spartan has right of first refusal, the official said, for a long-term lease of two acres at the port if it decides to build a bulk operation that could store 200,000 tons of ash a year.

North Carolina is not the first state to face the irony of importing coal ash as it grapples with disposing of the industrial waste.

Shipping containers of ash from China, Poland and India have come into Virginia, the Associated Press reported, as foreign companies find U.S. markets. Critics want Virginia to require more recycling of ash.

The Port of Virginia handled just one shipping container of coal ash in 2015, from India, AP reported. Last year, about 22 containers came from China and Poland bound for Ohio and Wisconsin.

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