



Kentucky Governor Declares State of Emergency After Coal Sludge Spill

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Big Sandy River, Kentucky. Seventy miles of waterways filled with 210 million gallons of coal mine sludge headed for Ohio River after a slurry impoundment broke on October 11.

Photograph courtesy Kentucky Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Cabinet.

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October 22, 2000 Frankfort, Kentucky - Kentucky Governor Paul E. Patton visited the Martin County site near Inez where an estimated 210 million gallons of coal mine sludge collapsed into the Big Sandy and Cold Water Branches of Wolf Creek. Public water supplies in the town of Louisa and Martin County District Number One were immediately polluted. On October 16, Governor Patton declared a State of Emergency for ten counties "in the wake of last Wednesday's failure of a Martin County coal slurry impoundment. ...The declaration covers the counties of Boyd, Bracken, Carter, Fleming, Greenup, Lawrence, Lewis, Martin, Mason and Robertson, all lying within the Big Sandy and Ohio River watersheds." By October 22, at least seventy miles of waterways were filled with the cement-like sludge.



According to the governor's Executive Order, "public water supplies are experiencing water shortages that are resulting in the disruption of essential services such as drinking water, basic sanitation and fire protection. These conditions are endangering the public health and safety and could result in

potential environmental damages."

The Kentucky Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Cabinet was directed by the Executive Order to take necessary actions to conserve water resources in the affected watersheds.

Interview:

Heather Frederick, Public Information Officer, Kentucky Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Cabinet, Frankfort, Kentucky:

"There were two water systems in Kentucky that were initially affected: one is a town called Louisa. The area where they draw their water from was polluted by this spill. For awhile, they were having to have water trucked into them. Now, they have constructed a temporary water intake on an unaffected area of the Levisa Fork and they have started pumping water. They will test the water to be sure that it's safe for drinking and hopefully by the end of this weekend (October 22), the folks will be cleared to drink the water again.

IS IT TRUE THAT THE NATIONAL GUARD HAD TO BE BROUGHT IN TO BRING WATER TO LOUISIANA?

The National Guard did assist in transporting water to Louisiana, yes.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER COMMUNITIES SUCH AS ASHLAND THAT HAS 30,000 PEOPLE?

The other community that was initially impacted in Kentucky was the Martin County District No. 1 (Inez, KY). Fortunately, they had two weeks supply of water in their reservoir and have been able to continue to supply water to the residents. But, the area where their water intake is was also contaminated by the slurry spill. And when I say contaminated, I mean polluted. So, they have been constructing a temporary intake that they will use to continue to obtain water. It's my understanding that the assembling of the pipe has been or will be completed today and they will go through the same process of pumping water and testing it to make sure it's safe for those folks to drink.

IS IT TRUE THAT THIS ALMOST CEMENT-LIKE SLUDGE WAS COMING DOWN THE MIDDLE OF THE BIG SANDY RIVER AND HEADED TOWARDS THE OHIO RIVER?

Yes, and it still fills the Big Sandy River. Just the beginning of it has begun to move into the Ohio. It's moving at about 1/2 mile an hour as it reaches the Ohio, so it's a very slow movement.

HOW THREATENING TO FISH, WILDLIFE AND PEOPLE IS THIS COAL SPILL?

We wouldn't advise anyone to go try to drink water out of the river, but I don't think they would want to when they saw it. But no water system is going to bring this water in and serve it up to people if it can't be treated to meet the established water quality standards.

HAVE THERE BEEN ANY REPORTS OF FISH OR WILDLIFE BEING KILLED?

There have been dead fish sighted in the water. The problem is that in most places this material is so heavy that the fish may be trapped underneath it. And also, they suffocate so they may be slowly dying as opposed to dying right away and floating to the surface. There is almost no visibility in the water to be able to tell how many fish are dead.

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Our next concern and what we're continuing to monitor right now is for the public water intake for the city of Ashland. We really can't predict what's going to happen as the heavier portion of the plume starts to enter the Ohio. Clearly, this is not the type of situation we've ever dealt with before and there are a lot of characteristics between the two rivers that could affect what happens here. We're working with the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers to monitor the situation and try to determine how this material is going to behave once it impacts the Ohio River.

Ashland has been developing a backup plan should that be needed. They have been cleaning barges that hold a half million gallons of water each and they would send those barges upstream to obtain clean water and then bring the water back to their water treatment plant and pump it into the intake so it could be treated and distributed to its customers.

DO THEY HAVE ANY IDEA HOW LONG IT IS GOING TO TAKE FOR 200 MILLION GALLONS OF THIS COAL SLURRY SLUDGE TO MOVE FROM THE BIG SANDY INTO THE OHIO?

No. (laughs) Like I said, It's not the type of situation we've ever dealt with before. Factors like weather could play a role in that, how much the material solidifies could play a role in that. It entered the Big Sandy through tributaries and there is still material in those tributaries, too. So if we got a heavy rainfall, it would just wash some of the material that has built up in those tributaries into the Big Sandy. This could be something we're dealing with for quite some time.

YOU SAY THIS IS AN UNPRECEDENTED SITUATION. I THINK THE MARTIN COUNTY COAL CORP. HAS BEEN ACTIVE IN THE STATE OF KENTUCKY FOR A LONG TIME. WHAT HAPPENED THAT THERE SHOULD BE SUCH A GIGANTIC SPILL?

Obviously we are still investigating what happened and we're working with them and the Health and Safety Administration to determine that. Clearly, there was some type of failure in the impoundment and we believe that that was caused by subsidence in underground mine works that are adjacent to the impoundment. That's our best understanding of what might have happened, but it's something that we're continuing to investigate. All I can tell you is that we inspected that site regularly. The inspections we have done for the past year have not found any problems there.

WHAT ARE THE CONCERNS GOING FORWARD NOW?

We definitely want to get this cleaned up as quickly as possible and we're focusing on how the best way is to do that and working with the coal company on the best way to do that. Our other concern will be to continue to monitor the movement of this material as it enters the Ohio River and work with water districts there.

IN TERMS OF TOXINS FROM THE SLUDGE MOVING INTO THE WATER, HAVE ANY OF THE RESULTS SO FAR INDICATED TOXICITY AND HOW LONG WILL THEY HAVE TO KEEP SAMPLING WATER TO DETERMINE THAT?

There were some heavy metals present in the material they sampled, but those metals do not pose a hazard to public water supplies as long as they are properly

treated by the public water supplier.

MEANING TO FILTER OUT?

Right."

More Information:

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