

COAL MINING'S LONG LEGACY OF WATER POLLUTION IN WEST VIRGINIA

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — The disastrous impact of mining on West Virginia's water resources goes back generations and could soon render much of the state's water undrinkable, activists and experts say.

Officials on Monday started lifting the ban on tap water prompted by last week's chemical spill in the Elk River. About 300,000 people in nine counties have been unable to use their water other than to flush toilets for the past five days.

Experts, however, say the problem goes much deeper, and that coal mining made many wells and streams useless years ago.

"For more than a century, the coal industry has had pretty much free rein to do whatever it wants," said Vivian Stockman, spokeswoman for the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition.

Stockman points to a common coal-industry practice: pumping chemical-laden wastewater directly into the ground, where it can leech into the water table and turn what had been drinkable well water into a poisonous cocktail of chemicals.

"All this waste is going underground for years, and then one day people start noticing their well water turning sometimes orange, sometimes black. The water stinks," Stockman told Al Jazeera.

As a result, people in some parts of West Virginia who had been able to rely on water from the ground found themselves having to go onto a municipal system. But now, for those around Charleston under a water ban, even their public tap isn't an option.

Bill Price of the West Virginia chapter of the Sierra Club, an environmentalist group, said that's exactly what happened to the town of Prenter in Boone County, which he said fought for years to get water from a city supplier. That supplier is West Virginia American Water, the company that has imposed the restrictions.

“After losing their local water due to pollution, they were able to get a source of clean water by installing a public system with a source that is around 50 miles away, only to have that source now impacted by a spill of a chemical used in processing of coal,” he said.

Price said that’s the case for most people in the nine counties under the water restrictions. First wells went sour, and now their municipal water has too.

Stockman said that the runoff from mountaintop-removal mining and the effect of underground slurry can cause severe health problems for people living near mines.

“People start getting ill, in household after household. Rare cancers, little kids with kidney stones, premature deaths,” she said.

She referred to a long legal battle in Mingo County over coal-waste disposal, when West Virginians won a settlement against coal company Massey Energy over health problems and drinking-water contamination after the company pumped coal waste into abandoned mines.

Price pointed to a statistical relationship between health problems and areas with mountaintop-removal mining, in which a mining company blasts off the top of a mountain to get to the coal inside. The rubble goes into a nearby valley.

“Higher rates of birth defects and shorter life expectancy have been shown in mountaintop-removal areas compared to other parts of West Virginia,” he said.

The coal industry, however, says it’s the victim of overregulation and that it can’t be blamed for problems with the state’s water wells.

“It’s just ridiculous to make such an allegation,” said Bill Raney, president of the West Virginia Coal Association, an industry group.

Although the chemical that spilled Thursday is used in the processing of raw coal, he said that the two were unrelated.

“It has nothing to do with the mining industry. It happens to be a chemical that’s used in part of the mining process, but it has a lot of other purposes, including the purification of water.”

Raney said that the industry complies or even “overcomplies” with the demands of government regulators and that tens of thousands of jobs in the state rely on mining and processing coal.

“There are about 20,000 jobs that pay \$60,000 to \$70,000 a year, letting many families pay for college educations for their children. The best coal miners in the world live right here in West Virginia,” he said. “Coal still generates the majority of energy in America so everyone enjoys a very low-cost source of electricity.”

He said that some regulations are fair but that others are based on “pseudoscience” and “create standards that are unachievable.”

But environmentalists say the economic benefits of coal aren’t worth it if the state’s water remains undrinkable.

Ben Stout, a professor of aquatic biology at Wheeling Jesuit University, said the clock is ticking on how much longer southern West Virginia will remain habitable if the pollution of water resources continues.

In less than two decades, most of area’s water could become undrinkable, he says.

“It”’s not so fast. This has been going on for a century. Many communities in southern West Virginia have been depopulated,” Stout told Al Jazeera.

“What could be our best export commodity, potable water, is rapidly becoming unavailable, unsustainable in many mining areas,” he said.

Meanwhile, Thursday’s spill in Charleston, where the chemical ran into the Elk River, continues to give off a distinct, licorice-like smell, in the air outside and from toilets in people’s homes.

But one resident said she was getting used to the unsettling odor.

“Can you smell it?” asked Vickie, who declined to provide her last name. “I’ve been smelling it so long, I can’t tell anymore.”

Source : <http://endcoal.org/resources/coal-minings-long-legacy-of-water-pollution-in-west-virginia/?ref=coal-mining>