

President-Elect Barack Obama
c/o Honorable Carol Browner

January 7, 2009

Dear President-Elect Obama,

On behalf of our 8,600 Tennessee members and activists, we are writing to invite you to tour our communities in eastern Tennessee and see the true face of coal.

As you probably know, on December 22, more than one billion gallons of toxic coal ash sludge spilled out of its storage pool at the Tennessee Valley Authority's Kingston Fossil Plant. The sludge rushed into the Emory and Clinch Rivers, tributaries of the Tennessee, which supplies drinking water to millions of people in the South. Following the spill, dead fish started washing up downstream. Early chemical analyses by the EPA show elevated levels of arsenic, lead, and thallium in the water. Coal ash also contains heavy metals like cadmium, selenium, and mercury, as well as other toxins like benzene. During 2007 alone, the Kingston fossil plant dumped 45,000 pounds of arsenic, 49,000 pounds of lead, 1.4 million pounds of barium, 91,000 pounds of chromium, and 140,000 pounds of manganese into the holding pond.

There are many issues at stake here that we want you to see first-hand on your tour. We hope you can ensure that people affected by this disaster receive proper care and compensation, including tests, if they request it, for exposure to toxic materials in the coal ash. We also hope you can investigate the response of the Tennessee Valley Authority to this incident and help us to hold them accountable. They have consistently downplayed the dangers of the spill. In addition, this spill and similar ones around the country show that safety regulations surrounding handling of coal ash are inadequate. While you are here, we hope you consider regulating coal ash as a hazardous waste.

The sad truth is that coal ash represents only a small part of the danger of coal. Normal operation of this one coal-fired power plant cuts short the lives of more than 140 people every year from regular air pollution that causes heart disease, respiratory ailments, lung cancer, and other illnesses; nationally, more than 24,000 Americans die each year from pollution from coal-fired power plants.

Furthermore, mountaintop removal coal mining has destroyed more than 450 mountains throughout Appalachia, including many in Tennessee, permanently destroying thousands of miles of streams and other waterways. And of course, coal is the number one U.S. source of global warming pollution. Here in Tennessee, we're already seeing the impacts of global warming: temperatures across the state have increased one degree Fahrenheit in the last 100 years and are projected to rise at least 2 – 3 degrees over the next hundred years in Tennessee. If we don't end our reliance on coal, heat waves and other extreme weather events are projected to increase; forests and wildlife are projected to diminish significantly; and our plentiful water resources could diminish significantly.

If our country doesn't act quickly to phase out our use of coal and move to clean energy like wind and solar power, Tennessee will no longer be the same great place we grew up with and love.

We look forward to meeting you and showing you around.

Sincerely,

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