



# Sludge Safety Project

A Collaborative Project of Coal River Mountain Watch, Delbarton Environmental Community Awareness Foundation and Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**March 22, 2004**

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## **Groups kick off coal sludge impoundment safety campaign**

HUNTINGTON, W.Va. —Three West Virginia citizens' groups have joined forces to work on a "Sludge Safety Project" aimed at addressing the health and safety problems coal waste impoundments pose for the state's residents.

The Sludge Safety Project is a collaborative effort of the Whitesville-based Coal River Mountain Watch (CRMW), Delbarton Environmental Community Awareness Foundation (DECAF), and the Huntington-based Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition (OVEC).

"Our project will raise awareness concerning the dangers that coal-waste impoundments present to their surrounding communities," said Larry Maynard, a founding member of DECAF. "We will work with others who wish to see state policies enacted that will protect the citizens of this state from these dangers."

In one of its first efforts, the group will deliver a letter to all state legislators asking for their assistance in beginning to develop plans to lessen the threats coal sludge impoundments represent to human health and well-being, as well as the state's economy and environment.

"The sludge dams are not necessary since there are alternative methods that are being used today by some coal companies," according to Freda Williams, of CRMW. Williams lives near Marfork Coal Company's (a Massey Energy subsidiary) Brushy Fork impoundment, which is permitted to contain up to 9 billion gallons of sludge. "Massey's Fola Coal uses a dry-press system, and Marfork used a dewatering system before they built the impoundment."

Williams explained that there are several dry methods for cleaning coal during processing, but these methods are generally more expensive than wet methods that produce sludge. Many people that live in the shadows of these massive impoundments feel like this cost is more than worth it when compared to the costs of potential disasters.

"The population that could be affected by sludge breakthroughs is staggering. The chemicals that are in the sludge are damaging to people and the environment."

The groups' Sludge Safety Project begins amid recent renewed attention to coal sludge impoundments. The United Mine Workers is calling for safeguards at Brushy Fork. In addition, the National Technology Transfer Center at Wheeling Jesuit University has contracted with the Mine Safety and Health Administration to lead a study of coal waste impoundments in southern West Virginia.

One aim of the study, funded with \$3 million secured by Senator Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.), is to find alternatives to impoundments.

In announcing the study, Byrd said, “Breaks in coal slurry impoundments can threaten the lives and health of area residents, destroy homes and businesses and contaminate water supplies. This dangerous potential looms over coal mining regions in West Virginia and throughout Appalachia.”

“Senator Byrd’s words echo the grave concerns of our groups’ members, coalfield residents who have gone to his office to speak up for the safety of their families and neighbors,” said Vivian Stockman, a grassroots organizer for the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition, and project coordinator for the Sludge Safety Project. “Our project aims to increase awareness among state policy-makers that something can and must be done about the real and present threat of coal sludge impoundments.”

With increased mechanization coal is being extracted much faster and less selectively, resulting in bigger sludge impoundments. Coal sludge is the semi-liquid waste left over after washing coal for market. Near their mining operations and usually in the heads of hollows, coal companies build dams to impound lakes of this waste.

Impoundments have a history of failures and blackwater releases. Residents worry that both surface and groundwater are being contaminated by the chemicals present in the sludge, which includes heavy metals that occur naturally in coal, such as the neurotoxin mercury, and man-made chemicals used to process the coal, some of which are known carcinogens.

Besides chemical contamination, residents also worry about the catastrophic failure of impoundments. In October 2000, at a mountaintop removal coal mining operation in Martin County, Ky., a Massey Energy subsidiary’s 68-acre impoundment partially failed. 306 million gallons of sludge broke out of the impoundment’s bottom into old mineworks. The sludge exploded out of two portals, and fouled about 75 miles of waterways. Stream life was smothered, water intakes were shut down and some people’s yards were buried in up to 15 feet of sludge. Residents say the area has not yet fully recovered.

Citizens and even some regulators have accused regulatory agencies of ignoring allegedly illegal behavior by coal companies. The lack of enforcement can lead to disasters such as the one in Martin County. A smaller failure at the same impoundment six years revealed the need for remedial measures, but instead of implementing those measures, the company was allowed to expand the impoundment.

“The regulatory agencies are not doing their jobs satisfactorily,” Stockman said. “That’s part of the reason why we needed to form this group. We have to work with all interested parties to ensure the protection of coalfield residents, the state’s water, and, ultimately, all West Virginians.”

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