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News Release

DATE: February 28, 2010

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When Environmentalism is Bad for the Environment: You Can Help Avoid an Emerging Disaster as America Considers Coal Ash

Three days before Christmas 2008, a containment dike at a Tennessee power plant's coal ash disposal facility failed. Approximately 300 acres, several homes, and portions of two nearby rivers were flooded by more than a billion gallons of ash slurry.

Fortunately, no one was injured. But the clean-up cost is now estimated to exceed \$1.4 billion and the incident has touched off a flood of a different kind: Unprecedented attention to coal ash disposal by news media, environmental activists, elected officials and government regulators.

Heeding calls for tougher coal ash disposal regulations, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has promised to propose new requirements on disposal facilities. But pushed by extremist anti-coal environmental groups, the EPA appears to be considering a course of action that would cause far more damage to our nation's environment than the incident in Tennessee.

Coal ash is produced when coal is burned to generate electricity. Because almost half of America's electricity comes from coal, that's a lot of ash – about 136 million tons in 2008, according to the American Coal Ash Association.

But coal ash is far from a waste material. In 2008, 44.5 percent of it was recycled in products ranging from concrete to wallboard. The benefits go far beyond just keeping the materials out of disposal facilities. Recycling coal ash conserves natural resources and saves energy. In some cases, products made with coal ash perform better than products made without it. For instance, coal ash makes concrete stronger and more durable. It also reduces the need to manufacture cement, resulting in significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. About 12 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions were avoided by using coal ash to replace cement in 2008 alone. The total value to our economy from this huge, but mostly unnoticed recycling effort is between \$6.4 billion and \$11.4 billion per year, according to the American Coal Council.

Recognizing these significant benefits, the EPA in 2003 created the Coal Combustion Products Partnership (C2P2) program to promote even more recycling of coal ash. That was after decades of scientific study, two Reports to Congress, and two formal Regulatory Determinations by EPA that coal ash should not be regulated as a hazardous waste.

In the wake of the Tennessee incident, however, environmental groups have become vocal in calling for EPA to implement the strictest kind of regulations possible on coal ash disposal. In response, EPA appears to be preparing to propose labeling coal ash a "hazardous" waste when it is placed in a landfill, but not when it is used in your home, school, or the road you drive on.

"Coal ash is no more toxic than dozens of other building materials you see and touch every day," said John Ward, chairman of Citizens for Recycling First – a new organization formed to defend coal ash recycling from the misleading attacks being launched by environmental groups. "In an effort to get jurisdiction over coal ash disposal, EPA may take the disastrous step of calling ash 'hazardous' in the disposal setting. Once that happens, the stigma of a 'hazardous' label could seriously damage one of the most successful recycling programs in history."

Citizens for Recycling First argues that coal ash disposal regulations can be improved without unnecessarily stigmatizing the ash resource. "The disaster in Tennessee was a failure of engineering," said Ward. "If you spilled a billion gallons of skim milk it would be an environmental disaster, but the focus would be on fixing the tanks – not demonizing the milk."

Ward also questioned the motives of the environmental groups that are pushing the EPA toward a "hazardous" designation. "If they were serious about wanting to help the environment, they would support steps to recycle more coal ash rather than throw it away. Instead, they persist in a misguided attack on coal that threatens to undo a recycling program that since 2000 has prevented over 117 million tons of carbon dioxide emissions and over 400 million tons of landfill use."

You can help defend coal ash recycling by joining Citizens for Recycling First and following its activities online. There is no cost to join. Visit www.recyclingfirst.org and click on "Support Us" and then "Joining Here."