

March 2026 - Toolkit

Toolkit: Stopping Trump's Elimination of Coal Ash Safeguards

How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit provides the public with essential information and resources to oppose the Trump EPA's gutting of critical coal ash standards that protect hundreds of communities located near coal plants around the country. The 2015 and 2024 coal ash standards represent years of advocacy and legal victories to protect communities from toxic pollution. This rollback reverses progress and endangers public health, particularly in working class and environmental justice communities.

You can find the EPA's proposed rollback [HERE](#).

Use this information to educate yourself, engage your community, and advocate for strong protections against coal ash contamination at the **EPA's public comment hearing on May 28, 2026 from 9am-6pmET**.

The more people who have access to these resources, the stronger our collective impact. Whether you're testifying, organizing a local action, or launching a digital push, this toolkit is designed to meet you where you are and help you move fast.

Points of Contact:

- **Sierra Club:** Jonathan Levenshus, jonathan.levenshus@sierraclub.org; Christine Ho (Comms), christine.ho@sierraclub.org
- **Earthjustice:** Lisa Evans, levans@earthjustice.org; Kathryn McGrath (Comms), kmcgrath@earthjustice.org

Submitting Comments & Register to Testify:

- **Written comments to EPA must be submitted by June 12, 2026.** Submit a written comment [HERE](#).
- **Virtual public hearing online on May 28, 2026 from 9am-6pmET.** More details and how to register [HERE](#). This is the only scheduled hearing to present public testimony to the agency. It is critically important that community voices are heard!

Organize Your Community:

- Comment Generation: sc.org/CoalAsh
- Share on Social Media:



- Write a Letter to the Editor: <https://win.newmode.net/sierraclub/coalash>

Go even further an organize an event or outreach to the public, here are some tools you can use

- [General Factsheet](#)
- [State Facts](#)
- [Stickers](#)

The Threat: EPA's Rollback Efforts

In March 2025, the EPA announced it would cease enforcement of the federal coal ash rules. The agency stated that enforcement actions related to coal ash contamination would now focus only on “imminent threats to human health” despite the widespread failure of coal plants to comply with the federal rules. EPA also threatened to re-write the 2015 and 2024 coal ash rules to reduce their scale, delay safeguards, and weaken closure requirements. Trump’s EPA has followed through on these threats– and more. Its proposal would dismantle current coal ash safeguards at the coal industry’s request.

Gutting of the Coal Ash Rule

Our position is clear: we will fight any attempt to weaken existing protections, allow continued contamination of drinking water sources, permit companies to avoid cleanup responsibilities, or reverse progress made to protect environmental justice communities.

Here is a summary of the EPA's proposal:

- Exempts hundreds of dangerous coal ash dumps from all regulations.
 - EPA proposes to eliminate a very large category of leaking ash dumps, Coal Combustion Residuals Management Units (CCRMU) were newly regulated by the 2024 Legacy Coal Ash Rule and include old landfills, dry coal ash ponds, structural fill sites and other old ash disposal sites on coal plant properties. There are hundreds of CCRMU dump sites and they are found at nearly every coal plant. These old, unlined ash dumps are leaking hazardous chemicals to groundwater, rivers, lakes and streams.
- Grants state agencies and EPA regional offices broad discretion to deviate from established, effective monitoring and cleanup requirements at the request of the coal industry.
 - The proposed rule creates permit exemptions and variances with weak standards that will likely result in no cleanup being required at many sites.
 - For example, the proposed rule would allow companies to assess groundwater contamination 150 or more meters from a coal ash dump rather than at the dump's edge, effectively permitting a zone of contamination.
 - EPA even suggested that it might be appropriate to move monitoring as far as the boundary of these large power plant sites.
- Allows states and EPA to increase the amount of cobalt, lithium, molybdenum and lead permitted in coal ash-contaminated water above federal safe standards.
- Permits companies to leave coal ash in dumps even when it is known to be in contact with groundwater and leaking from the site.
 - The current rules forbid leaving coal ash stored in contact with groundwater, because of the threat to nearby waterways, wells, and communities.
- Delays the closure and cleanup of more than a hundred legacy coal ash ponds by removing deadlines and allowing permitting authorities to wait years before establishing standards or simply deciding not to require closure and cleanup.
- Removes all safety standards for “piles” of coal ash waste no matter how large they are or where they are located.
 - Coal ash piles are currently regulated as landfills because they present the same risks and the rule requires liners, monitoring, dust control, closure, and cleanup for them. Under the proposed rule, utilities would be able to create massive piles of coal ash with no responsibility whatsoever for addressing the serious risks they pose.
- Eliminates restrictions on the use of coal ash as a substitute for clean soil (called “beneficial use”) in any location, even in places such as parks, playgrounds, and residential developments. Developers would be able to use large amounts of toxic ash as structural fill with no requirement to demonstrate its safety or to report or monitor its use, even though heavy metals and radioactive materials in coal ash can pose serious health and environmental harm.

Messaging Points on EPA’s Proposal

Core Message and Call to Action

Coal ash is toxic waste that poisons our water, air, and communities. After decades of advocacy, we won strong federal protections in 2015 and 2024. Now the EPA wants to roll back these life-saving standards. We cannot go backward. Our health, our environment, and our most

vulnerable communities depend on maintaining strong coal ash protections. Join us in demanding that the EPA protect people, not polluters.

Public Health & Environmental Harm

- Coal ash contains arsenic, boron, cobalt, chromium lead, lithium, mercury, radium, selenium, thallium and more. These contaminants are linked to many forms of cancer, heart disease, and brain damage, among other diseases .
- Groundwater contamination from coal ash is widespread – it is documented at nearly every coal plant in the country.
- Rescinding CCR Management Unit (CCRMU) requirements abandons communities near coal plants because it fails to regulate all the toxic ash disposed on the property– thus allowing utilities to walk away from leaking coal ash dumps newly regulated by the 2024 legacy rule.
- Eliminating the environmental demonstration requirement for coal ash structural fills opens the door to the use of toxic waste near homes, drinking water wells, and recreational areas in the guise of “beneficial use.”
- Dewatering structures, if exempted from federal oversight, become unmonitored pathways for toxic leachate to reach groundwater and surface water.

Accountability

- The 2015 Coal Ash Rule and the 2024 Legacy CCR Surface Impoundment Rule were the product of years of scientific study, public comment, litigation, and documented harm – this proposal undermines both.
- Utilities subject to the 2015 Coal Ash Rule have had over a decade to plan and comply. Weakening the rule now rewards delay and non-compliance.
- The new site-specific permitting pathway converts enforceable national groundwater standards into a starting point for industry negotiation, favoring well-resourced utilities and coal companies over communities with limited capacity to advocate for themselves.
- Allowing closure of legacy surface impoundments to be deferred to state permitting programs creates an uneven patchwork of protections, with some states far less equipped or willing to enforce meaningful standards.
- Each successive rollback – deadline extensions, CCRMU delays, and now these sweeping changes to the 2015 and 2024 rules – sets a precedent that environmental deadlines and standards are optional for industry. The coal industry shouldn’t get any more handouts.

Impact

- The communities bearing the greatest burden of this proposal are working class communities and communities of color, who are disproportionately located near coal ash disposal sites and have the fewest resources to respond.
- These families cannot afford to move away, cannot afford indefinite bottled water, and have no seat at the table when site-specific permits are privately negotiated between utilities and state or federal agencies.
- Weakening corrective action cleanup levels through site-specific permitting means some communities will be left with contaminated groundwater that falls below federal safe thresholds – simply by regulatory redefinition.

- Environmental justice demands that national health standards apply equally, regardless of zip code or proximity to a power plant. This proposal moves in the opposite direction.
- Delaying or eliminating cleanup requirements does not eliminate the contamination – it shifts the long-term remediation cost onto taxpayers and onto the communities least able to absorb it.
- Delay in cleaning up coal ash contamination makes the contamination worse and harder – or even impossible – to clean up.
- Allowing coal plants to leave toxic waste in groundwater guarantees a nearly permanent source of hazardous water pollution.

Tips for your Testimony

- Testimony is limited to 5 minutes.
 - Remember this formula: 1 minute = 150 words
- In-Person Public Hearing: Write your comments down or bring notes. Practice your testimony so that you know it is no longer than five minutes. An average person can read 750 words in five minutes.
- Virtual Public Hearing: Follow the same tips as above. You can read your comments into the speaker on your computer or your phone.
- Make it personal.
 - Speak about your experiences and those of your community.
 - Express your personal concerns.
 - Don't worry if your comments aren't "technical" – you don't need to be a scientific expert for your comments to matter.
 - Do tell EPA your specific concerns – about your community, about a particular coal plant, or concerns related to drinking water, health, or recreation.
- End with an "ask."
 - Demand that EPA do its job to protect you, your community, your environment, and the health and environment of the generations that will follow you.

Sample Testimony

Introduction

"Hello, my name is [my name] and I am from [my hometown and state]. I am a member of the [organization]. Thank you for this opportunity to testify."

Your Personal Story

This is a very important part of your testimony. Use the prompts below to provide details about how you are personally hurt by coal ash pollution.

Tell your story, especially how close you live to a coal plant or water polluted by a coal plant, or how pollution from a coal plant hurts your quality of life. For example,

- Do you avoid boating, swimming, or fishing in a local waterway near a coal plant?
- Are you afraid to eat fish caught near a coal plant?
- Are you worried that coal ash is polluting your drinking water?
- Are you concerned that the structure holding a coal ash pond near you will fail?
- Does toxic dust blow from a nearby coal ash landfill or pond?
- Are you concerned that a coal plant is unsafe, and EPA is not doing enough to address it?
- Are you concerned that the owner of the coal plant will leave without cleaning up contamination, harming the community for generations to come?
- Are you concerned about the value of your property if the plant never cleans up its coal ash?
- Are you concerned about the health of your family, your children, your grandchildren?
- Will EPA's weakening of the new coal ash rules leave your community, your drinking water or your favorite lake or stream unprotected?

General Talking Points

Please see key messages below.

Conclusion

Here is the place for **YOUR ASK**.

- Demand that the EPA do ALL it can do to protect you and your community.
- EPA must ensure that ALL coal ash is cleaned up and reject this dangerous proposal!

Key Talking Points

Why We Must Oppose the Gutting of EPA's Coal Ash Rules

- Coal ash is a mix of hazardous pollutants, metals, carcinogens, radioactive substances, and neurotoxins, including arsenic, boron, cobalt, chromium, lead, lithium, radium, selenium, and other heavy metals. These have been linked to cancer, heart and thyroid disease, reproductive failure, and neurological harm.
- Over 90% of coal plants are contaminating groundwater. Industry data show widespread pollution above EPA health standards, threatening drinking water for millions of Americans.
- The 2024 rule closed critical loopholes. It required monitoring and cleanup of hundreds of legacy coal ash dumps that are poisoning communities but had evaded regulation. Rolling back this rule abandons vulnerable communities.
- This is an environmental justice issue. Coal ash sites are concentrated in low-income communities and communities of color, who have suffered decades of pollution while their concerns are ignored.
- Weak enforcement enables corporate irresponsibility. Limiting enforcement to only "imminent threats" allows ongoing contamination to continue unchecked, forcing communities to live with poisoned water and air.
- Coal plants must clean up their mess. Companies profited from burning coal for more than a century in the U.S. They must be held accountable for cleaning up the toxic legacy

they created.

What We're Fighting For

- Maintain strong federal coal ash protections that require groundwater monitoring, corrective action, and proper closure of all disposal sites.
- Preserve the 2024 Legacy CCR Rule to ensure cleanup of hundreds of previously exempt sites.
- Ensure robust EPA enforcement to hold violators accountable and protect communities.
- Prioritize environmental justice by protecting communities that have borne disproportionate pollution burdens.
- Require complete cleanup with coal ash removal from groundwater, not just capping toxic waste in place.

Countering Trump EPA Arguments

Claim: "Coal ash regulations are too costly."

- **Response:** The cost of cleanup is far less than the health care costs, lost productivity, and environmental damage caused by coal ash pollution. Communities shouldn't subsidize corporate profits with their health.

Claim: "Current regulations are sufficient."

- **Response:** Over 90% of coal plants contaminate groundwater, proving current compliance is inadequate. The 2024 rule addressed critical gaps that allowed hundreds of sites to evade regulation entirely.

Claim: "Capping ash in place is safe."

- **Response:** Coal ash in contact with groundwater continues leaching toxins. Complete removal is the only way to ensure long-term protection when coal ash is sitting in groundwater. If ash is not removed from the groundwater, the ash will continue to leach hazardous chemicals indefinitely.

Background: The 2015 and 2024 Coal Ash Standards

The 2015 Coal Ash Rule

In December 2014, the EPA finalized the first-ever federal regulations for coal ash disposal under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA). These regulations, published in April 2015, established:

- National standards for coal combustion residuals (CCR) from coal-fired power plants
- Requirements for groundwater monitoring at coal ash disposal sites
- Closure requirements for leaking and unsafe coal ash ponds
- Cleanup requirements for contaminated sites
- Public disclosure requirements through facility websites

The 2015 rule was a response to catastrophic disasters like the 2008 Kingston, Tennessee coal ash spill, which released over 1 billion gallons of toxic waste. However, the rule had significant gaps—it exempted about half of all coal ash in the United States, including legacy ponds and landfills that stopped receiving ash before 2015.

The 2024 Legacy Coal Ash Rule

In April 2024, the EPA finalized the Legacy Coal Combustion Residuals (CCR) Surface Impoundment Rule, closing the loopholes in the 2015 regulations. This rule:

- Extended federal monitoring and cleanup requirements to hundreds of older coal ash disposal sites previously exempt from regulation
- Required groundwater monitoring, corrective action, and proper closure for legacy surface impoundments (ponds) at inactive coal plants
- Addressed historic disposal units leaking and contaminating groundwater at currently regulated power plants
- Mandated site-wide corrective action, preventing companies from blaming contamination on unregulated units

The 2024 rule represented a major victory for environmental justice communities, as coal ash sites are disproportionately located in low-income areas and communities of color. The rule ensures that over 320 coal plants in 41 states will be required to conduct site-wide cleanup that will protect the air and water of fence-line communities.

Additional Coal Ash Rollbacks

- **Compliance Deadline Extensions**

The EPA recently finalized compliance deadline extensions for CCRMUs, providing industry with significantly more time to meet regulatory requirements. CCRMUs are areas of land where coal ash is stored that are not themselves landfills or ponds but are located at active power plant sites or at a site where a legacy ash pond is located. Before the 2024 Coal Ash Rule, these areas were unregulated.

The Trump EPA rule grants operators an additional 33 months beyond Biden-era deadlines, extending groundwater monitoring system installation requirements until February 2031 instead of the originally proposed 15-month extension. Facilities also receive another year to complete reports identifying the location and size of the CCRMU, with the option to combine reporting requirements.

The rule became effective February 9, 2026. It's another handout to the coal industry, allowing more contamination of groundwater and drinking water with toxic pollutants. The coal industry had ample time to comply since coal ash regulations were first established in 2015 and that utilities chose not to prioritize cleanup despite having the resources to do so.

- **Unlined Pond Extensions**

In November 2025, the EPA proposed extending the closure deadlines of unlined coal ash ponds at 11 coal plants. The Trump proposal would give coal plant owners until October 2031 – 3 more years – to operate. The 2015 Coal Ash Rule required all unlined coal ash ponds to cease receiving waste by April 2021 and begin closure, so if this proposal is finalized, coal plants will have a full decade beyond the original deadline before it has to stop dumping toxic ash into water supplies.

We expect this proposal will be finalized in early spring 2026.

This scheme specifically prevents coal plants from closing, allowing them to continue burning coal and creating additional air pollution while coal ash contamination continues. Extending this deadline once more at these 11 coal plants will not stop ongoing contamination or protect communities, it will only put more money into the pockets of coal plant owners.

Understanding Coal Ash

What is Coal Ash?

Coal ash, also known as coal combustion residuals (CCR), is the toxic sludge left behind when coal is burned for electricity. U.S. coal plants continue to produce approximately 70 million tons of coal ash annually. This waste contains a dangerous mix of heavy metals, carcinogens, and neurotoxins that threaten human health and the environment.

Toxic Components of Coal Ash

Coal ash contains at least 17 toxic heavy metals and pollutants, including:

- Arsenic: Causes bladder, skin, kidney, and lung cancer; also linked to heart disease, diabetes, and neurological damage
- Boron: Causes respiratory irritation and damage to kidneys, liver, brain, reproductive organs, and intestines
- Cadmium: Causes lung disease, kidney damage, and bone loss; linked to lung cancer and cardiovascular disease
- Chromium: Chromium VI is a known carcinogen; causes lung cancer and skin ulcers
- Cobalt: Associated with blood disease, thyroid damage, and other endpoints
- Lead: Particularly harmful to children, causing brain damage, developmental delays, and behavioral problems; no safe exposure level exists
- Lithium: Causes kidney damage, neurological damage, decreased thyroid function, and birth defects
- Mercury: Damages the nervous system, causing vision impairment, memory loss, seizures, and developmental delays in children
- Molybdenum: Causes gout-like symptoms in humans, and reproductive toxicity in laboratory animals.
- Radium and other radioactive materials: Increase cancer risk through long-term exposure
- Selenium: Causes reproductive failure and developmental deformities in fish and wildlife; linked to neurological damage

- **Thallium:** Associated with a long list of adverse health effects including liver and kidney damage and hair loss

Public Health Impacts

Contamination Pathways

- **Groundwater Contamination:** Over 90% of coal plants are polluting groundwater with toxins above EPA health standards. Unlined ponds allow heavy metals to leach into aquifers, contaminating drinking water wells.
- **Surface Water Pollution:** Coal ash contamination reaches rivers, streams, and lakes through runoff and spills, threatening drinking water sources for millions.
- **Air Pollution:** Wind carries toxic coal ash dust from disposal sites into nearby communities, where residents inhale dangerous particles.
- **Soil Contamination:** Coal ash used as fill material in construction projects contaminates soil at schools, playgrounds, parks, and residential areas.

Health Consequences

- Prolonged exposure to coal ash pollution affects every major organ system in the human body:
 - **Cancer:** Increased risk of lung, bladder, skin, kidney, and other cancers from arsenic, chromium, cadmium, and radioactive materials
 - **Neurological Damage:** Mercury and lead exposure cause cognitive deficits, developmental delays, memory loss, and behavioral problems, especially in children
 - **Cardiovascular Disease:** Arsenic and other toxins increase risk of heart disease, hypertension, and cardiac arrhythmia
 - **Respiratory Illness:** Lung disease, emphysema, asthma, and breathing complications from inhaling coal ash dust
 - **Kidney and Liver Damage:** Multiple heavy metals cause organ failure and chronic disease
 - **Reproductive and Developmental Problems:** Birth defects, reproductive failure, and developmental abnormalities

Environmental Impacts

Water Contamination

Coal ash poses a severe threat to water resources:

- At least 91% of coal plants are contaminating groundwater above federal safety standards
- At least 24 coal ash sites nationwide have contaminated more than 100 private drinking water wells
- Unlined coal ash ponds and landfills allow toxic metals to leach directly into aquifers
- When coal ash ponds fail catastrophically, millions of gallons of toxic sludge can contaminate rivers, streams, and drinking water supplies

Ecosystem Damage

Coal ash pollution devastates ecosystems:

- Fish kills and deformities: Selenium accumulation causes severe developmental abnormalities in fish and amphibians, eliminating entire local populations
- Wildlife poisoning: Animals drinking from or living near contaminated water sources suffer neurological damage and death
- Habitat destruction: Coal ash spills and contamination destroy wetlands, rivers, and terrestrial habitats

Environmental Justice Impacts

Disproportionate Burden on Vulnerable Communities

Coal ash pollution is an environmental justice crisis. Studies consistently show that coal ash disposal sites are disproportionately located in low-income communities and communities of color:

- 78% of African Americans live within 30 miles of a coal-fired power plant
- Coal ash facilities are 2.8 times more likely to be in communities with 50% or more non-white residents
- At six of the ten most contaminated coal ash sites, populations of people of color and/or low-income residents are higher than state averages
- Communities near the 75 worst-polluting coal plants have an average per capita income of \$17,500, and nearly 53% are people of color

Additional Resources

- [Interactive map of U.S. coal ash dumpsites](#): Use this map to understand where coal ash might be stored near you and how a given site may be impacted by the EPA's expansion of the federal Coal Ash Rule.
- [Coal ash state fact sheets](#): Learn about coal ash dumpsites in 31 states and Puerto Rico.