

## LAUREL



to the **Chattanooga Times Free Press**, **The Tennessean**, and **The Post and Courier** for strong reporting on the coal-ash spill in Harriman, Tennessee.

On December 22, a forty-acre elevated retention pond, which stored more than a billion gallons of fly-ash sludge, a byproduct of coal combustion, ruptured, leaking its contents over some three hundred acres, including into the Emory and Clinch rivers. In addition to the physical force of the spill, which destroyed several homes, the ash contained arsenic and other toxic compounds. The effect on the area was best captured by a strong package of aerial photographs by *The Tennessean*, which showed readers the full extent of the damage.

As cleanup began, the *Chattanooga Times Free Press* dug deeper, analyzing inspection records to show that authorities had known of the pond's structural vulnerabilities prior to the rupture. The *Press* also reported that the Environmental Protection Agency does not regulate the toxic ash because it does not classify the material as hazardous. Thirteen hundred such ponds around the U.S. store the country's fly ash; 72 million tons of ash were generated in 2007, according to the American Coal Ash Association.

An investigation by *The Post and Courier* in Charleston, South Carolina, first examined the issue in October 2008 in a prescient series entitled, "Toxic Ash: A License to Pollute." "For years, coal-burning companies, along with federal and state regulators, viewed ash as if it was no more dangerous than dirt," the paper asserted. "But contamination cases here and across the country, along with a growing body of evidence about the effects of ash on wildlife, raise new questions about how this little-known byproduct is handled—and how it will be dealt with in the future."

**DART** to these same papers and to **The Associated Press**, for blowing a chance to clarify the environmental complexities around coal. The media ran into trouble when they attempted to balance the voices of the Tennessee Valley Authority, the utility responsible for both the ash pond that flooded and the coal plant that generated the ash, with voices from local conservation groups.

"There is no such thing as 'clean' coal, and this is a perfect example of that," Nancy Cave, the Coastal Conservation League's project director, told *The Post and Courier*. While that is undoubtedly true—burning coal will always produce toxic byproducts—local and national reporters failed to place the term in proper context. Strictly speaking, "clean coal" (a public-relations term promoted by the coal

industry) refers to carbon-capture and storage technologies that many experts think can be employed to trap the carbon-dioxide emissions from coal plants and store them more safely underground. While journalists have been right to criticize the misleading nature of the term, they tend to oversimplify a very important issue when they don't explain the broader reality behind it.

Most experts agree that the energy industry should begin phasing out its use of coal and invest in greener technologies like wind and solar, and also that that process will take some time. Coal still generates almost 32 percent of the nation's power. More importantly, it is still our cheapest energy source, and as electricity prices inevitably rise during the transition to clean energy, some burning of coal will be necessary to defray the costs. Given that reality, The Union of Concerned Scientists recommends that the federal government invest in research and development for carbon-capture and storage projects. That technology still faces many technical hurdles, however, and has not been proven to work on any meaningful scale.

The point is that the full, complicated reality of "clean coal" needs to be aired in and by our media so people can make informed decisions rather than emotional ones, and the fly-ash spill in Tennessee provided an occasion to do just that. Reporters missed that opportunity by tossing off clean-coal sound bites from local advocates without providing sufficient context. Coal is certainly not clean, but in essence, the confusion of terms led environmentalists and journalists to inadvertently criticize a technology that is designed to reduce pollution. Indeed, one type of carbon-capture technology—something called integrated gasification combined cycle—could reduce or eliminate coal ash as a byproduct.

The best way for reporters to bring more clarity to the national dialogue about coal is to engage scientists, rather than activists, as sources. Several groups, including the Society of Environmental Journalists, have called for greater cooperation between scientists and journalists, but acknowledge that the relationship needs work. One session at SEJ's 2007 conference was entitled "Can This Marriage Be Saved? Why Journalists and Scientists Just Don't Communicate."

The energy story is an obvious place for journalists and scientists to strengthen their relationship. Scientists, not advocates, can best explain the realities of clean-coal and green technologies and provide the nuanced picture that so many advocates eschew. **CJR**

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*For further analysis of the coverage of coal fly-ash ponds ("From Fly Ash to 'Clean Coal': National media slow to expand upon excellent, local reporting after recent spills," February 20, 2009) and other discussions on science and environment news, please visit [The Observatory at CJR.org](http://TheObservatory.org).*