Residents have been opposed since it was first announced, while environmentalists say they've never seen a plan like it.

Ramaco, LLC, a Kentucky based coal company, is seeking approval from Pennsylvania regulators to open a new mine and extract up to eight million tons of coal from beneath the farms and countryside of Nottingham Township, Pa. To dispose of the waste that will be generated during excavation, the company plans to pump toxic wastewater into the depths of a nearby abandoned mine.
Existing issues with the site have residents weary of further development. The former Mathies Mine was owned by Mon View Mining, which went bankrupt in 2005, three years after the company laid off its 200 workers. Absolved of its responsibilities by the bankruptcy, a common occurrence for mining operations at the time, the company was not required to continue managing the Mathies site.

Over one million gallons of acid mine drainage (AMD) now flow from the mine daily, according to the website of the company hired by the state to treat the waste.

AMD forms when mines are not properly maintained and actively pumped free of water. The potentially dangerous mixture of water, heavy metals and toxins can be created long after a mine is no longer active. Exposed minerals react with air and pooling water, creating a toxic sulphuric mixture and other by-products. Contaminated water will kill plants, animals, insects and aquatic life if the levels of acidity reach high enough levels.

Nottingham residents fear adding more waste to the old mine would overwhelm the facility tasked with handling the drainage.

“Ramaco is proposing to dump their wastewater into an abandoned mine, footing the taxpayer with the bill for the treatment process,” Veronica Coptis, a member of the Center for Coalfield Justice group told the local Union-Finley Messenger.

Concern also exists over whether the toxic water would be capable of reaching the treatment plant. To be processed, the waste water would need to travel four miles underground to the state facility without absorbing into the earth or escaping into waterways. Directly over the tunnels are farm land, creeks and a county park.

How the company hopes to achieve this outcome is uncertain. Environmentalists say they’ve never seen a similar plan, while a spokesperson with the DEP told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette in March that significant questions still remain over the details of Ramaco’s proposal.

Speaking about the state’s problems with mine drainage more broadly, the representative also told the paper, “We have thousands of miles of streams and creeks that are fouled by mine drainage.”

State Rep. Rick Saccone publicly opposes the project and wrote a letter to Ramaco in February echoing the concerns of activists and his
constituents, saying he fears the plan “opens up the doors for ground contamination and unsafe consequences on constituents.”

**Boom and Bust**
Nottingham sits in the middle of a region with a long history of industry. Mining and steel production were once the economic engines of the Mon Valley, which originates in West Virginia and winds north to Pittsburgh. The hulking steel mills that lined the Monongahela River and the countless mines that tunnelled underneath the nearby green, rolling hills helped Pittsburgh become the center of American manufacturing for much of the 20th century.

Although once directly providing tens of thousands of jobs and supporting a hundred thousand more, the industries experienced a massive economic collapse in the 1980s that eliminated most of the jobs they sustained. The region was thrust into double digit unemployment and then economic stagnation for the better part of two decades.

Like the rest of the region, Nottingham experienced booms and busts as well. The small town of 2,500 sits 30 miles south of Pittsburgh next to the Monongahela River on top of a large coal bed. Opened in the 1940s, the Mathies mine, where Ramaco plans to dispose of any waste generated by its project, produced coal for half a century, but suffered a series of setbacks that resulted in its closing. A partial tunnel collapse in October 1990 triggered a fire, requiring the mine be sealed off. Nearly 600 workers lost their jobs and a hundred nearby families evacuated to escape the sulphuric smoke and carbon monoxide that rose from the tunnels.

National Steel Corporation sold the mine three years later in December 1993 and it was finally reopened. Only a fraction of the jobs returned, however, and they lasted less than a decade before the operation’s final closure due to financial difficulties.

**A world away**
Gulf Coast residents in Louisiana have been waging their own battle against Ramaco’s sister company and partners.

Due to its prime location at the mouth of the Mississippi River, Myrtle Grove, La. was chosen as the location for an export facility to ship domestically mined coal to booming Asian markets. Located in Plaquemines Parish just south of New Orleans, the community already
contains two coal export terminals.

Thick clouds of black coal dust originating from the nearby facilities leave layers of grime on homes, cars and the rest of the town. Residents worry RAM Terminals’ proposed facility would only add to this and other problems. Asthma and respiratory conditions are common, and locals place most of the blame on the coal companies.

The Sierra Club and local environmental groups take issue with the proposed terminal as well, fearing its impact on plans to restore fragile coastal wetlands, an issue that gained national attention following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Organizations such as the Gulf Restoration Network believe the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion, a $400 million state project to divert the Mississippi River, would be jeopardized if the facility is built.

The diversion’s proposed location is directly adjacent to and downstream of the site RAM Terminals was granted a permit to build on. Pollution from the facility could be directed into the wetlands meant to be reconstructed, while needed sediment flowing down the Mississippi River would be impeded. When the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources approved RAM’s coastal use permit in September, a coalition of locals and advocacy groups responded by filing a lawsuit calling the approval illegal.

If the project clears the multiple hurdles it faces, there is a high-likelihood the terminal will process coal from Nottingham.

In a 2013 issue of industry newsletter Coal Trader, Ramaco President
Michael Bauersachs addressed the possibility of shipping the Nottingham coal to Asia: "We could look to the export market," he said. "That's a very good possibility." The mine is close to the Monongahela River, so "we could send it to New Orleans" for transport overseas.

The US coal market is shrinking rapidly. New environmental regulations and a desire for cleaner energy are forcing suppliers to look for overseas buyers. China and India have been the two largest importers in recent years, lacking the domestic supplies to feed their rapidly expanding economies.

If the coal from Nottingham is ultimately destined for Asia, the trip to New Orleans and across the Pacific Ocean would be a minimum 13,000 mile, carbon emitting global voyage opposed by nearly everyone along its path.

Comments (2)

Veronica Coptis 18.06.2014 17:16
The mine in Nottingham is not a longwall mine but just tradition room and pillar deep mine. There is a significant difference. Longwall mines are much more destructive. If you can correct that in the article that would be great.

Ozair Akhtar 18.06.2014 12:17
Nice to see this. But the world needs to have coal.

Add comment

Authorization required for adding comments