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 Opinion

DAMN THE TORPEDOES

Delaying tactic or a solution?

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The 600-acre coal ash ponds located at Alabama Power's Plant Barry in Bucks, roughly 25 miles north of Mobile (via Mobile Baykeeper).

It's the nature of this business to be skeptical. After decades of people lying to you —

or at least shading the truth to fit an agenda — it's hard not to become somewhat inured of the truth being buried beneath 21 million tons of BS.

I'll admit, that kind of thinking isn't always positive. It's not necessarily a good quality to be sitting in the back of the room waiting to see if the floor falls in while everyone else is jumping up and down with happiness. But the floor does fall in too frequently to be ignored.



[New life for coal ash? Alabama Power announces recycling plans at Plant Barry](#)

So you'll forgive me if I'm not doing back handsprings about the recent announcement that Alabama Power Company is partnering with Eco Material Technology (EMT) to build a coal ash recycling facility that will — around the time you become a great-great-grandparent — remove the 21 million tons of toxic waste sitting in an unlined pond at Plant Barry in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta and turn it into concrete.

This Jan. 25 announcement has been hailed by many as a win for those of us who

don't want to see millions of tons of coal ash sludge washed into "America's Amazon" should the earthen levees holding it back fail one of these rainy, floody days.

As I've been writing about this for years now — advocating for APCO to simply do what is being done everywhere else and get its ash out of the groundwater — a number of people have approached me as if this battle has been won. The consensus appears to be that Alabama Power "blinked."

Not so fast, rabbit. This is Alabama Power we're talking about and they're not pumping altruism out on those high-tension wires. The catch is there's always a catch.

I'm not opposed to anyone digging out this environmental nightmare in waiting and making something useful from it, per se. But I'm also not interested in feeling like a big ol' bass full of arsenic and cadmium with a hook hanging out of my mouth. Like I said, I'm a skeptic, and not just because I'd rather stick a fork in a wall socket than blindly trust APCO.

Alabama Power coal ash lawsuit dismissed by federal judge

The most obvious problem with this "solution" is most of us will be dead and gone before it takes place. The batteries on my Office Depot calculator are still functional, so by accurately identifying the correct digits and pushing them, it was easy to determine that at the rate of 700,000 tons a year Eco Material plans to mix into concrete, it'll take a whopping 30 years to clear the pond. And that's assuming they actually plan to get it all out of there. How much they ultimately remove was left rather murky.

Keep in mind, ALL of Alabama Power's coal ash ponds in this state leach toxins into the groundwater. They've all been fined by ADEM for doing just that. And even though ADEM has not come back for another bite of that apple because it is a feckless toady agency more interested in doing APCO's bidding than protecting the environment,

there is no logical reason not to conclude these ponds are still putting heavy metals and other toxins into the surrounding waterways.

So this new deal — which doesn't appear to affect the other ponds strewn across the state, by the way — guarantees at least another three decades of toxins flowing into the Tensaw Delta from Plant Barry's coal ash pond. See why I'm skeptical?

The other thing that gets my spidey senses tingling is an apparent reluctance both APCO and EMT have to simply explain exactly where this new coal ash recovery plant will be built. EMT's press release said nebulously they would "build the processing plant within the permitted boundary of the site." I'm not sure what that means. We've asked multiple times. No response.

One of APCO's more ridiculous arguments against removing the coal ash and taking it to a lined facility that's not right next to the Mobile River is that digging it out and trucking it anywhere would present a greater environmental risk than simply leaving it sitting in the mud. This new arrangement, though, clearly involves digging it out, and if it also includes trucking it anywhere, that talking point repeated by half of our local elected officials suddenly appears, um, "fluid." That's just speculation, of course, since they won't tell us where the plant will be. But, you know, I'm a skeptic.

The announcement of this plan also comes at a fraught time for APCO. The EPA has all but rejected its plan to "cap in place" these millions of tons of toxins. The feds have clearly explained that even after the process is completed, millions of tons of coal ash will still be sitting in groundwater and that's not acceptable. APCO faces the imminent rejection of its plan, which would leave the company left with only one option — dig that mess out and move it to a lined containment area.

The recycling announcement has served a couple of purposes. First, it provided the spineless elected officials of this state something they can say to the growing number of constituents who think the ash should be moved. "Well they're going to recycle all of that stuff now, darlin'. It ain't a problem no more."

The move also has given APCO positive PR for the first time in a long time. Casual observers and media-types alike have praised the deal. A contributing opinion writer for the New York Times even gushed about the plan in a piece entitled “We Might Be One Step Closer to Saving America’s Amazon” that ran this Monday.

Margaret Renkl, who “covers flora, fauna, politics and culture in the American South,” according to the paper, lined out the various problems with Plant Barry’s coal ash pond and APCO’s plans, but still counts the announcement as “extremely good news.” Not trying to be too harsh. I get where she’s coming from, but she also failed to mention it would take 30 years to completely drain the swamp, so to speak.

Baykeeper asks federal court to reopen Plant Barry case

I’m sure APCO is lapping it up. Particularly as they are supposedly in negotiations for a settlement with the EPA. If the feds take the attitude that the big utility has come up with a solution, perhaps they’ll just let things stay as they are. Right now, the walls are closing in on Alabama Power in regards to their efforts not to clean up their mess. This may be all the wiggle room needed.

After all, a lot can happen in 30 years. But maybe I’m just being skeptical.

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