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Pollution from coal ash spill stains Dan River

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It has been a little over a year since a storm water drainage pipe under Duke Energy's coal ash storage pond in Eden, North Carolina collapsed, allowing 39,000 pounds of coal ash to spill into the Dan River.

Since then, residents of communities along the river, scientists, Duke representatives, state regulators and others have debated about the impact the spill will have on the surrounding communities. But, among the contrasting views and evidence, only one thing is truly clear: no one really understands what kind of impact the spill has had and will have in the following years.

Coy Harville, the Westover District representative on the Pittsylvania County Board of Supervisors, states that the spill has had an impact on the public's perception of the river in Pittsylvania County in Virginia.

"A lot of people don't like the coal ash spill, period," said Harville. "We've had the Dan River designated as a scenic river and, well, (the spill) paints a bad picture for the counties (along the river)."

Harville cited from personal experience that the public has become wary of using the river for recreation and for drinking water.

Negating any effects from the spill — even years down the road — may not be possible. The Environmental Protection Agency and state regulators allowed Duke to cease cleanup efforts last year. They decided continuing cleanup may do more harm than good, as dredging could stir up long-settled deposits of industrial waste that once washed into the river during a century's worth of manufacturing along the Dan.

Guilford Visiting Assistant Professor of Biology Will Mackin argued that Duke should still undergo severe consequences as a result of the spill.

"The CEO should be fired, and they shouldn't get the \$10,000 bonuses that they get (each year if the company meets or exceeds their expected profits)," said Mackin. "There is not really an excuse (for the spill) except laziness and inefficiency."

While Duke has spent nearly \$20 million responding to the



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After Duke Energy's coal ash storage pond spilled coal ash into the Dan River in 2014, residents nearby are hesitant to use the water.

spill, it is still undergoing a legal National Resource Damage Assessment process for its violations of the Eden pond site and 14 others ranging across North Carolina. Currently, it is clear not much else can be done to alleviate potential effects of the spill.

Yet, there is positive change that has resulted from this event.

"(The spill) has definitely prompted new legislation in North Carolina," said Assistant Professor of Geology Holly Peterson. "That's really the big benefit of it."

The new legislation she refers to now prohibits the creation of any new coal ash ponds and requires Duke to eliminate the remaining 14 coal ash ponds in North Carolina over the next 15 years.

In addition, the EPA has called for closer and more comprehensive inspections of the remaining ponds and of any pipes that run under or beside them. This is to see, especially, if the pipes are made of corrugated metal, a material that is

prone to rust and collapse.

The section of the pipe that collapsed under the Eden Pond was made of this material. A Feb. 1 News & Observer article, "A Lack of Oversight Let Flaws, Mistakes Go Undetected," states that an accidental false report, made by an engineer on the pond in the 1990s, led Duke to believe that the entire pipe was made of reinforced concrete, which is a stronger material than corrugated metal.

It is a combination of flukes in inspection, such as this one, which led to the spill a year ago and, consequently, to the legislation that will hopefully implement strict enough regulation to prevent further spills.

This event served as a warning against potentially more disastrous spills from the other, larger coal ash ponds in need of more thorough inspection and maintenance. Hopefully, the legislation will allow for a positive, preventative approach towards other ponds and will become the most influential effect of last year's spill.

News in Brief: 8 trends to watch out for this year

<p>BY ABE KENMORE WORLD & NATION EDITOR</p> <p>NEWS IN BRIEF</p>	<p>The rise of India:</p>  <p>India's economic growth, according to a recent story in The Economist, may surpass China's in the next year or two. Last year, their gross domestic product grew by 7.5 percent. China's GDP, on the other hand, grew only 7.4 percent, its slowest growth in 24 years, according to Reuters. India has benefited from the drop in oil prices and its banks are lowering interest rates. This bodes well for India's Prime Minister Modi, who is finishing his first year in office.</p>	<p>Oil abroad...</p>  <p>It is no secret that oil prices have plummeted around the world, from around \$110 a barrel over the last four years to less than \$50, according to the BBC. This has been hurting nations like Russia, Nigeria and Venezuela, where oil makes up 70-90 percent of exports. The Islamic State continues exporting black-market oil and selling it at much lower prices, bringing in almost \$3 million a day.</p>	<p>...And at home:</p>  <p>According to the BBC, the U.S. is producing more oil than it has in the last 30 years. This is partly due to the explosion of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, a controversial technique for extracting oil and gas that was banned by New York late last year. The oil infrastructure, however, is in flux. The Keystone XL oil pipeline from Canada is still under debate. Unions and refineries are clashing while oil workers strike. And most recently, a train carrying oil tankers derailed in West Virginia, exploding and leaking oil into a creek.</p>	<p>Ukraine</p>  <p>Despite a recent ceasefire between the government and rebel groups, neither side seems keen to comply with the terms, according to the BBC. Although fighting has mostly ceased, Rebels have taken the town of Debaltsevo, and neither side has removed their heavy weaponry. The ceasefire was agreed upon in Minsk, Belarus, and promised the removal of foreign troops, lifting of restriction on rebel territory, and decentralization of rebel held areas by the end of the year. Implementing it, however, appears to be more difficult than initially thought.</p>
	<p>The Islamic State:</p>  <p>Obama has asked Congress for authorization to use military force to target the Islamic State. Obama's AUMF calls for a three year time limit and no troop involvement beyond those already on the ground. Both Democrats and Republicans have criticized the bill, according to CNN. Some, such as Senator John McCain, say it is too restrictive, while others say it is too permissive. Regardless, nations will continue to respond as IS continues executing captive internationals and members of local minority groups. Most recently, the Libyan branch beheaded 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians.</p>	<p>Mars or bust!</p>  <p>The Dutch non-profit Mars One, which wants to create the first colony on Mars, has announced that it has narrowed the list of 200,000 potential colonizers to only 100, according to The Guardian. Out of these, six teams of four will be created. Mars One hopes to land the first of these in 2025, despite MIT researchers announcing that their plan would result in all the settlers dying within a few months. While the plan is almost a decade in the future, there will be plenty of updates between now and then.</p>	<p>Internet for All:</p>  <p>The Federal Communications Commission is planning to pass regulation insuring that all content on the Internet remains equally easy to access, according to The Washington Post. This concept, known as net neutrality, means that all Internet service providers cannot privilege certain content on the Internet by blocking or slowing certain sites. Some Republicans are unhappy about what they see as overreach by the FCC, and one — Senator Dean Heller — has introduced a bill to reveal the draft FCC proposal before they vote on it on Feb. 26.</p>	<p>And much more...</p>  <p>These are just a few stories to track, but there are many more. Oxfam made headlines when it announced that the world's richest 80 people control as much of the world's wealth as the poorest 50 percent. The #Blacklivesmatter movement which began last year after police shootings in Ferguson continues. Cuba and the U.S. may continue negotiations to restore diplomatic relations as early as next week. Many Alabama judges are ignoring a federal court ruling to issue same-sex marriage licenses until the Supreme Court rules on the matter in April. What do you think the biggest stories of 2015 will be?</p>